

In the Box

I've done nothing wrong.

After two weeks of newcomer training, Takafumi Douno was assigned to Factory 8 of N. Penitentiary. He was ordered by a prison guard, clearly years younger than him, to spend the morning observing the routines. So he obeyed, and stood to the left of the two desks lined up beside the manager's station. The factory area was about the size of two classrooms put together. The room was divided into four sections by two walkways intersecting in a cross. The work areas were raised about twenty centimetres higher than the walkway.

Factory 8 mainly handled sewing, and several dozen sewing machines were placed in neat, equally-spaced rows from the front of the work area to the back. A steady *dut-dut-dut* echoed in the air, like the rumbling of an earthquake.

It was the beginning of September, and the temperature was still high. Douno could feel the sweat slowly drench his back just by standing on the spot. The distinct smell of a gang of males, a scent that mingled with body odour, irritated his nose. The barred window to his left was thrown open wide, yet there was no breeze. There were, of course, no fans in this factory. To top it off, these men in their mousey grey factory uniforms were perspiring at the brow, frantically sewing none other than ladies' fur coats.

"Permission, sir," a man called loudly in front of his sewing machine, raising his right hand high. He looked to be around his forties. The guard standing at the manager's station pointed at him promptly.

"A refill of thread, please, sir," the man yelled. Once he was granted permission, he hastily jogged to the shelves at the back of the factory. Holding the spool of thread, he raised his voice again: "Permission, sir!"

During training, Douno was given an instruction booklet of sorts about living in prison. In meticulous detail, it explained things like the daily schedule, planned right down to the minute; how to spend time within the group cell and the factory; and what kind of things were prohibited. Douno knew that he was not allowed to walk around freely without the guard's permission, even for work-related reasons. He had gotten used to restrictive life from his time spent in the detention centre; and yet, the suffocating strictness of this place went far beyond that. Despite the fact that there was a newcomer in the room, everyone continued to sew without so much a glance in his direction—proof of how thoroughly the rules were enforced.

Douno could hear the cicadas buzzing through the drumming of the sewing machines. Feeling anything but the urge to work, he could only stare dumbly at the reality before him. He wondered what he was doing in a place like this. Why was he standing here sweating, watching other men working in front of the sewing machines sweating just as profusely?

"Why me?"

He had repeated the question to himself hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands of times from the moment he was arrested by the police, through the year and a half in the detention centre, up to this very moment.

He would forever remember that spring two years ago. March 16, past seven o'clock in the evening. Douno had been on his way home from work. He stepped off the train onto the platform of his transfer station only to be grabbed by the arm from behind. He turned around to see a woman standing there. She was perhaps in her early twenties, with short hair and a pretty face.

"This man molested me!" the woman shrieked. All eyes of the passersby turned on them. Douno could not recall doing any such thing.

"I haven't done anything. Are you sure it wasn't someone else?" he said.

"Don't try to play dumb," the woman said shrilly, her voice rising with her temper.

"I saw him do it," chimed in another woman who had been standing nearby. The atmosphere around him turned grim. Even though he had really done nothing, the accusing gazes of the people around him said otherwise.

"It really wasn't me," he protested.

"Come with me!"

Douno was taken to the station manager's office with the woman still holding him by the arm. No matter how many times Douno persisted that he had not done it, his account was not taken seriously. The police came shortly afterwards.

"We'll hear your story at the station," he was told. Douno had figured they would understand if he explained himself—he was innocent, after all. But all the detective had to say was, "You did it, didn't you?" and refused to believe any part of Douno's side of the story.

Douno was then put into a detention cell, and was questioned relentlessly almost every day without even a chance to go home. The detective used a carrot-and-stick tactic, first intimidating him by telling him to "fess up already, because we all know you did it" before giving him smooth talk, saying if he would just say he did it, he would be let off with a 30,000 yen fine. Douno hated the idea of confessing to a crime he did not commit, so he continued to deny that he had done anything.

Those days were like a nightmare. Due to the stress of his ordeal, Douno lost hair, suffered stomach pains, and lost ten kilograms of weight. He was afraid that after being run into the ground and blamed over and over for something he had not done, he would one day lose his sanity and begin to feel like he actually had done it.

There was no proof—only the woman's word. Douno continued to plead not guilty. He figured in this situation there was no way he could be charged: after the 20-day detention period was up, he would be set free to go home. Or so he thought.

On the last day of his detention, Douno was slapped with a conviction. He felt the world go dark before his eyes. He applied for bail numerous times, but was turned down. He spent the year and a half until the announcement of his guilty verdict in his detention cell. In his small, five-square-metre room, he thought endlessly about what he had done to deserve this.

Douno was ultimately given a two-year sentence. Because of his persistent, staunch refusal, he was deemed "showing no signs of remorse" and was not favoured by the judge. What was more, the woman had testified that Douno molested her almost every day, adding "repeat offender" and "premeditated and malevolent" to Douno's judgement. As a result, Douno was not given a suspension on his sentence despite being a first-time offender. Pre-sentencing detention days—the period of time kept in detention until the sentence is finalized—were usually deducted from the total sentence, but only eighty per cent was applied to Douno's, leaving about ten months of prison time.

"Why don't we acknowledge the crime?" Douno's attorney had suggested when he had been charged. According to the lawyer, once Douno was charged, there was almost no chance that he would be found innocent. If Douno kept up his denial, his sentence would only get more severe.

"I understand you want to fight because you're innocent, Mr. Douno. But this is reality. Yes, you'll be lying if you acknowledge the crime—but you'll get a sentence suspension. You'll be able to get out of the detention centre."

Douno refused to assent, and it was partly from stubbornness. He had come this far—how

could he bring himself to back down now? Once his sentence was passed, Douno thought of killing himself. He had been fired from work, imprisoned in a confined space for a year and a half, and now been slapped with a criminal record. Just because on that day, at that time, he had happened to board a crowded train.... If he had actually been guilty, at least he would have been able to resign himself to his crime.

The peal of a bell echoed throughout the factory.

"Stop working! Line up!"

At the orders, the sewing machines stopped drumming at once. All the inmates lined up on the walkway for roll call.

"Number 145, Douno," barked a guard on the podium. Douno flinched as his spine tensed. He slowly turned around.

"Line up behind Section 3 and go to the cafeteria. Section 3 head, Shiba! Raise your hand!"

A bespectacled man in his mid-fifties standing to the very left snapped his right arm up.

"Go over there."

Douno jogged towards the man who had put his hand up. He tripped over his feet and nearly fell over. His eyes met with the Section 3 head. The man grinned.

"Get behind the tall one over there," he said. "You'll be sitting beside him in the cafeteria, too."

Douno fell in behind a man who looked closed to 190 centimetres in height. The line began to move immediately. Once they entered the cafeteria, all members sat down without a word. Douno also sat down as he was told, beside the tall man. At the signal from the factory guard, everyone began their meal at once. Today's menu was stewed squid and white radish, fried eggs, spinach dressed in light broth, and barley rice. The seasoning was bland, and portions were small. Douno did not have an appetite, and put his chopsticks down before he was even halfway through. They were commanded to say, "thank you for the meal", and that concluded lunch. Once the dirty dishes were deposited into the sinks, Douno's surroundings erupted into chatter and noise from the TV. The silence of moments before seemed like a dream.

Some got out of their seats while others opened books, but Douno remained sitting at the table, his face turned slightly downwards at the dirty tabletop. Douno had been kept in his own cell at the detention centre, so apart from visitors, he hardly had the chance to speak to anyone. Back then, he did not care who it was—he was desperate just to talk to someone. But once he was here, that desire dissipated rapidly. Everyone seemed to have some unsavoury aspect to his face. But of course—the people here were "real criminals".

"Hey!"

Douno raised his head at the call, which belonged to a horse-faced man in his forties with a lazy eye who had sat across from him.

"Case of first-day nerves, huh? Don't worry, you'll get used to it."

Douno was painfully aware of the obvious attention he was drawing from those around him. Back at the factory, they had all seemed so disinterested.

"How old are you, by the way?"

Douno could smell the other man's bad breath, even though they were far apart. He unconsciously knitted his brow at the odour of rotting fish.

"I'm thirty."

"I see," the man murmured. "And what'd you do?"

"...I didn't do anything," Douno answered in a small voice. The man laughed.

"You had to have done *something* to be thrown in here! What? Theft? Drugs?"

"I've been wrongly accused."

"Huh?" The man grimaced.

"I'm wrongly accused. I'm innocent."

There was a moment of silence, but before long the chatter soon resumed.

"Oh, right, okay," muttered the man with the lazy eye. Then, with a palm to his forehead, he chuckled. "Heh heh," he said, his shoulders shaking. "You must have some weird preferences to get yourself into jail when you haven't done anything."

Vulgar hoots and laughter erupted from around him. Douno looked down at the table. He balled his hands into fists in his lap. Two or three more people came to talk to him after that, but Douno put his head down on the table and pretended he was asleep.

Douno was placed into group cell 306, a five-person cell. It was about twelve square metres in area, with toilet in the far right corner sectioned off by glass on the top half, and a simple stainless-steel sink on the left. There were small shelves on the wall along with towel hangers for each resident. Each person's futon was folded and placed along the walls, with pyjamas and sheets folded pristinely on top.

Shiba, who had introduced himself as the head of Section 3 at the factory, was also in the same cell. Work ended at 16:20, followed by roll call. They returned to the cell and took roll call again before going for dinner. They were able to take a breather from their minute schedule only after dinner was over, around 17:30.

Douno's seat beside the tall man at the long, rectangular collapsible table became his "usual spot". Even during free time, they were scolded by the guard if they were caught walking around the cell aimlessly or lying down. This had also been the same for Douno when he was at the detention centre.

What surprised Douno when he entered the cell was that it was equipped with a television set, which he did not have at the detention centre. He had seen a TV in the dining hall, but had not expected to see one in the cell as well.

"Douno," called a voice. He turned around. "TV time starts at nineteen o'clock," said Shiba with a grin, which made his eyes crinkle behind his spectacles.

"I'm sure you've already heard the basics from the caretaker and the guard in charge, but if there's something you need help with, you just ask me. I'm the section head at the factory, but we take turns being the head of the cell. That changes every week. As for where you'll sleep, you'll be beside the toilet. It'll stink, but all the newcomers start there. You don't have to worry, though—in a week, your spot will be shifted along with everyone else. Anything else... well, just make sure you don't cause trouble for anyone else. And don't get in trouble and get points deducted. We'll lose TV privileges."

Douno said he understood.

"I'll introduce myself while I'm at it. I'm Shiba, head of Section 3 at the factory, and head of the cell for this week. The tall guy beside you is Kitagawa. He's the youngest in our cell—twenty eight, I think."

The man whom Shiba called Kitagawa had a face as expressionless as a Noh mask. Only his eyes moved slightly to glance at Douno. His attitude seemed to say he was not interested in the newcomer.

"I'm Mitsuhashi," said the man sitting across from Kitagawa. He looked in this early thirties, about the same age as Douno. "I'll be out on parole before the year is out. It'll be short, but I hope we can get to know each other." He smiled good-naturedly. He was a round-faced and sociable man, with a mild demeanour and kind countenance. If it weren't for his shaved head and prison uniform, he would not look like a prisoner at all.

"And the guy beside Mitsuhashi is Kumon."

He turned out to be the man with the lazy eye who had said Douno had weird tastes in the cafeteria.

"How long's your sentence?" Kumon asked suddenly. Douno did not want to answer him, but he felt like it would be a wise idea not to start any conflicts off the bat with his cellmate.

"Ten months," he said reluctantly.

"Ten months?" repeated Kumon, narrowing his already-squinty eyes. "A piss sentence, then."

Douno tilted his head to the side, not quite understanding him.

"That's what we call short sentences under one year," Mitsuhashi explained kindly.

"You said something about false charges at lunch, but you're in this joint, so there's gotta be beef with your name on it."

Everything about the way Kumon talked irritated him. He tried not to let it show on his face.

"Indecent assault," Douno answered calmly.

"I see. Guess you aren't as decent as you look, making moves on women, huh," Kumon spat, clicking his tongue. Douno hastily explained himself.

"No, it's not what you think. I was mistaken for molesting her."

"Yeah, but—" Mitsuhashi butted in. "This is your first offence, right, Douno? Isn't a full sentence kind of harsh for a first-time indecent assault? Don't they usually give you a suspension?"

"I was dismissed for final appeal at the Supreme Court."

"Wow," Mitsuhashi said with wide eyes. "Supreme Court for molestation? Couldn't you have settled out of court for something like that?"

It was too late for anything now. Douno bowed his head and stared at the knots in the wooden table. All the time spent in the detention centre; exorbitant legal fees—and his guilty verdict, which had put it all to waste. If this was what had been waiting for him, he could have lied and admitted to the crime from the beginning. Then, he would have been let off with a 30,000 yen fine and a summary offence and been set free within the day. He would not have had to burden his parents and younger sister with trouble, and he would not have had to quit his job. —His heart ached. The year and a half he had endured, believing in his innocence, had been akin to garbage.

"Well, a lot of things happen in life. You have to think of it as a lesson and put up with it."

Douno felt a twinge of irritation at Shiba's matter-of-fact tone. *What "lesson"?* he thought. There was no "learning" in being jailed with other criminals, living a life choked with rules and monotonous, menial tasks. There was only humiliation.

Suddenly overcome with nausea, Douno dashed into the washroom. As he expected, he threw up his entire dinner. He rinsed his mouth at the sink. The back of his throat burned. *I want to be alone, I want to be alone...* but here, he could not even get that. He wanted to lie down, but since it was not yet rest period, he would be reprimanded by the guard if he was spotted. Douno sat at his "usual spot" on the floor cushion at the table, and put his head down.

"Hey, you alright?" Shiba said to him.

"Fine," Douno replied abruptly without raising his head.

"Are you not feeling well?"

"No, it's... I think I'm just tired." Douno continued to sit still with his head down on the table. Eventually people stopped approaching him. There was a burning ache in the lower part of his stomach. Tears gathered at the corners of his eyes.

"Say, isn't Taoka almost out on parole? I was wondering why the guy was swinging his dick in my face yesterday in the showers, and it turns out he got more beads in. I wonder how the guy

can do it." It was Kumon's voice.

"But his dick is freaking full of them. They look like grapes, it's disgusting," Mitsunashi said lazily.

"No complaints, as long as they're as good to eat as grapes," Shiba remarked to laughter from everyone else. Douno thought only the yakuza beaded their penises. Topics that had never been discussed in his life were discussed daily here. He felt weary already.

"Why's Taoka in here again?" Mitsunashi asked.

"Murder," Kumon said nonchalantly. *Murder*. The word made Douno's heart jump. He lifted his head.

"The woman he was cheating with got a boyfriend, and he beat him to death, I think," Shiba added while rubbing his chin.

"Isn't his sentence pretty light, then? Four... five years, right?" Mitsunashi looked unconvinced as he furrowed his brow.

"It was manslaughter. He told them some crazy story about how he only meant to punish the guy with a few punches, but the guy ended up dying on his own. I guess that must have gotten through," Shiba said.

"Ah, I see," Mitsunashi murmured in reply. "Four or five years for killing someone. That's pretty light."

Douno was struck by fear. Murder was unthinkable. It was unthinkable, and yet here they were, talking about it normally. An electronic sound issued from the room's PA speaker which sounded a lot like a school bell. Everyone stopped chatting at once and began to put away the table and floor cushions. The futons were laid out, and Douno hastily changed into his pyjamas, feeling rushed as everyone else began to change around him. As for his prison uniform, he imitated the person beside him and folded it neatly and placed it at the head of his futon.

The futon itself carried a unique smell of sweat and body odour. Since he was beside the toilet, there was also the strong smell of excrement. The TV was turned on, but there were only talk shows on. The laughter annoyed him, but he could not bring himself to ask for the TV to be turned off.

Douno lay stock-still on his stomach and pressed his face into the pillow. He felt a sense of futility creeping up from his feet. What was he doing sleeping here, mixed in with real criminals in this stinking, noisy place?

He had done nothing wrong. He had never been late or absent throughout middle and high school, and had gotten awards for his perfect attendance. In university, he was in a volunteer group that helped poor Ethiopian children. Even after he began working at the city hall, he had only been absent for one day when his cold had gotten out of hand. He had been decent and proper in everything he did. Through what fault of his did he have to end up here? Did he simply have to write everything off as "bad luck"?

Music came on to mark lights out, and the TV was turned off. The room went dark. Ten minutes had not yet passed, and Douno could hear someone grinding his teeth. Even if he plugged his ears, he could hear it. He tossed and turned in irritation, and gave a short sigh before looking to his side. His eyes met with the man beside him. Douno felt a bolt of fear at the man's eyes, which looked like they were glittering in the dark. It was Kitagawa, the youngest man in the cell. Kitagawa extended his fist towards Kumon, the source of the tooth-grinding, and slammed it on the *tatami* floor close to his head. The deafening grinding ceased instantly. This seemed to be the usual remedy.

"Th-Thank you," Douno stammered. Kitagawa promptly turned his face the other way, with not so much as a polite smile of affirmation. Once the tooth-grinding stopped, the smell of the

toilet began to bother him again. This was Douno's first day in a group cell, in prison—and he could not sleep a wink.

They rose at 06:40. They promptly changed, folded their futons, and got started on cleaning. Douno had heard that cleaning duties changed weekly. As a newcomer, however, he was assigned the toilet. He felt a sense of irony, cleaning, red-eyed, the source of his sleeplessness.

Cleaning was followed by roll call, then breakfast. They wolfed their meals down in five minutes or so, then brushed their teeth. An announcement to "begin heading out" was made, and shortly their guard in charge came to unlock the cell and give the "head out" call. They went out into the hallway and lined up. They were forbidden from speaking to each other as they walked silently in rows of two. Before they entered the factory, they stripped down to their underwear at the physical inspection station and walked past the watching personnel before entering the next room to change into their factory uniforms. Once inside the factory, they went through roll call again, then did a strange exercise called "ceiling-raising" before getting down to work.

Douno was assigned the task of sewing the lining which had already been basted into place. Even though his section head had just taught him the day before, Douno could not recall the proper order to thread his sewing machine. In a situation like this, he knew he just had to request instruction. Wondering where section head Shiba was, Douno turned to look behind him when suddenly he was blasted by a yell.

"Hey, you!" Douno's whole body seized up. The guard in charge of the factory was in front of him in an instant. "What the hell were you doing?" the guard demanded, his face livid. "No glancing around during work hours!"

"Oh, I... wanted to... the section head... to r-request instruction..." Douno's voice dwindled to a whisper at the guard's yelling and intimidating aura. The guard twitched one eye.

"You're new," he remarked.

"Yes, sir."

"You're forbidden from looking at anything other than your work at the factory. If you wish to request instruction, you are to raise your hand and speak up."

"Yes, sir..."

"Section 3 Head, request for instruction!" barked the guard. Shiba went up to the manager's station to pick up a Work Instruction card before coming to Douno's work station.

"I... I couldn't remember how to thread..." Douno's fingertips and voice were trembling in the after-effects of being reprimanded.

"Threading, alright," Shiba repeated, and slowly threaded the machine for him. "I remember you said yesterday it was your first time touching a sewing machine. It'll be tough until you get used to it, but take your time and make sure you do it neatly. If your stitching is crooked or off the mark, you can take out the stitches and start over."

Douno resumed his work after Shiba left. All he had to do was sew along the basting stitches—he knew that, but his fingertips continued to tremble. He was afraid he would sew his fingers along with the fabric. He gritted his teeth and stepped on the electric pedal. His sewing sped up and slowed down erratically as he tried to get a feel for the pedal.

In the end, his stitches ended up snaking along the seam and he was forced to take them out. No matter how many times he tried, he could not sew along the basted seam. He grew more irritated with each time he had to undo his stitches. Why did he have to sew, anyway? Why did the thread tangle so easily? Why was it so hard to take out? Douno suppressed the urge to throw the cloth aside, and continued to meticulously undo the tangled thread.

"Stop working! Line up!" Douno raised his head at the call. Everyone around him sprang up, and Douno fumbled his way after them down to the hallway. It was already noon. He had not been able to complete a single piece that morning.

Once lunch was over, Douno approached the bookshelf at the back of the cafeteria. He felt like if he just sat absent-mindedly, people would start approaching him. He recalled the incident yesterday, when Kumon had commented on his "weird preferences". If that was how people thought of him, whether it was only a few or the vast majority, he did not want to talk to anyone anymore. Most of the books in the bookshelf were so worn and tattered that even a second-hand bookstore would probably refuse to take them. Douno extracted a dust-covered volume from the bottom shelf. As he opened it, the cover tore away from the rest of the book and hung limply.

"Douno."

He turned around to see Shiba behind him.

"How's the work coming along?"

"...Not very well."

"It takes a while to get used to the sewing machine," Shiba smiled wryly. His eyes flitted to the disintegrated book in Douno's hands. "You like reading?"

"Well, I suppose."

"You look like someone who would. The type with the brains."

Shiba had probably spoken to him out of kindness, but Douno could not help but feel like there was sarcasm in the way he said "with the brains".

"I don't have much else to do here," he replied brusquely.

A queer expression crossed Shiba's face for an instant before he was called away. Douno felt relieved to be alone again. Shiba was a criminal. Everyone here, other than him, had done something bad. *I'm the only decent one here*, Douno thought.

One day in the beginning of October, after the last vestiges of summer had faded and one could feel a faint chill in the mornings, Douno's younger sister, Tomoko, came for a visit. It was their first meeting after Douno was put in prison. Tomoko's face looked thinner through the plexiglas.

"How are mom and dad?" Douno asked. Tomoko's cheeks tensed slightly.

"Mom is in the hospital with a stomach ulcer," she mumbled, her eyes fixed downwards. "I think the exhaustion was getting to her. But she's going to be discharged soon. Don't worry. She was telling me how she wanted to come along today."

Douno clenched his hands tightly in his lap. His mother was a kind, free-handed and energetic woman. For her to get a stomach ulcer—was it from stress? It was a blow to him.

"How are you?" Tomoko said. "They're not giving you a hard time?"

"I'm fine. I'm doing alright."

"That's good," said his sister with a breath of relief. "I wanted to tell you something. Mom, dad, and I, we've discussed this already. We're going to move out of the house in two months."

"What?" Douno cried.

"Mom and dad are going to grandma's place in Fukushima. I have my job, so I'm going to rent an apartment here."

"Wh—Why are you moving? Dad hasn't even hit retirement yet."

Tomoko lowered her eyes.

"He hasn't, but he's going to quit."

A short silence. Douno finally put into words what he had been fearing all along.

"...It's my fault, isn't it."

"No!" his sister insisted. "This is none of your fault. We all believe your innocence, but people in the neighbourhood like to gossip."

"But that's almost like running away," Douno protested.

His sister hung her head. "I'm sorry," she murmured. "I know it must be the hardest for you out of all of us. I know—we know—but mom and dad and I are tired. It's been painful having to put up with what people say..."

The familiar image of his home revived in the back of Douno's mind. Their father had bought the house when Douno was in fourth grade. They had only finished paying off their mortgage two years ago. Douno's father had laughed and said his house was finally his own. They had lived in and grown familiar with that house. But now it could be someone else's by the time Douno got out of prison.

He had lost his job, his freedom, and brought trouble upon his family; now, to top it off, he was losing a place full of memories. He had lost whatever one could lose in a year and a half—trust, moral virtue—he did not expect he could be stripped of anything more. But here he was.

"I've already decided on an apartment," said his sister brightly. "It has a loft. They've gone out of style, supposedly, but it's always been my dream to live in one."

Tomoko's tone was carefree. Even though she was surely in a lot of pain herself, she was keeping the conversation light out of consideration for him. Douno made an effort not to be gloomy in the face of her kindness.

"You didn't have to rent a place. Why didn't you just move in with Yasuoka?"

Douno had meant to tease her, but Tomoko's face turned rigid. About a month before Douno had been arrested, a man called Yasuoka came to ask for Tomoko's hand in marriage. Both Douno and his parents were overjoyed. They had been discussing betrothal gifts and the wedding day when Douno was caught. Once he was arrested, he was too occupied with his own troubles to have the time or energy to think about his sister.

"Right... about that. It fell through," his sister brushed it off lightly. "I guess we just weren't compatible. It happens, right?"

Was it really because you weren't compatible? Douno wanted to ask, but could not bring himself to. He was afraid to ask. Before long, their fifteen-minute meeting time was up, and Tomoko left him with underwear, socks, and money before going home.

After returning to the factory, Douno found it difficult to concentrate on his work. The move, his mother's hospitalization, his sister's broken engagement... the topics cycled through his head in order. The incident had not only involved him; it had also involved and ruined the people around him.

If only he had not gotten on the train that day. If only he had not stood behind the woman that day. If only he had listened to the detective and opted for a settlement out of court. If only he had lied and admitted to the crime, paid the 30,000 yen penalty and apologized....

He had believed in justice, believed that someday they would understand that he was right. He had believed and fought in court until the end—but what meaning did it all have now? He had stuck faithfully to his belief that he was right, and in exchange he had been given a criminal record for indecent assault and ten months of life in prison.

His foot stopped over the pedal. He wished someone would tell him if he was wrong somehow. If he had committed such a crime that he deserved this situation, he wished someone would explain what it was to him. Bitterness filled his heart, and his eyelids burned. In an effort to keep himself from crying, he gritted his teeth and stepped on the pedal.

He immersed himself in the rhythmical *dut-dut-dut* noise of the sewing machine, and for a fleeting instant he wished he could die.

Their lunch break was twenty minutes long. It was shorter than usual because they had an exercise period later. Almost all of Douno's meal was left untouched. The meeting with his sister had made him think about a lot of things, which weighed down on his chest and made him unable to eat.

After their lunch break, all of the sewing factory workers were let out into the grounds. After some simple exercises, they dispersed and were free to spend their time however they liked. Some played softball while others cheered them on; some began to do push-ups silently on their own; others stood around and exchanged rumours. Douno joined none of those groups, and instead picked a sunny spot near the wall and sat down by himself. In his early days he had been invited out to play softball as well, but Douno declined with the excuse that he was bad at sports. It was true that he was bad, but his honest reason was that he did not want to socialize with other inmates.

In an environment where talks of theft and drugs were but casual conversation, Douno felt like his own standards of what was right and what was wrong would begin to go astray. He felt like he would be influenced by those "bad things" and lose his perception of normality.

In the evenings after supper, he immersed himself in the books he borrowed from the cafeteria until lights-out. He never spoke unless to answer a question, and he never initiated a conversation. Even if he never said outright that he wanted nothing to do with them, he probably exuded that kind of aura; even Shiba and Kumon, who made a point to talk to him about anything, stopped approaching him. When interaction ceased, so did the flow of information. It had been almost a month now since Douno first entered this group cell, but he had no idea about what kind of crimes his cellmates were imprisoned for, or how long their sentences were. In prison, inmates called themselves "sentence servers", which he had no idea about until recently.

"What're you up to?" The voice belonged to Mitsunashi, from the same cell.

"Not much."

Mitsunashi sat himself down beside Douno with a grunt. "Nice weather, isn't it?" he grinned.

"It is," Douno answered cautiously, wondering why the man was sitting beside him.

"You alright?" Mitsunashi said without warning.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you seemed kind of strange after your meeting. I wondered if you were okay."

Douno was alarmed at the man's sharp observation.

"A lot of people break down after meetings. As long as you're willing, I'm right here to listen," Mitsunashi said. "Oh, but you don't have to force yourself," he added. "You know that I'll be out on parole soon, right? But there's something that makes me want to watch out for you, you know... well, because..."

His tone was muddled, as if he had something stuck between his teeth.

"Ah, damnit," he muttered as he raked a hand over the back of his head. "To tell you the truth, I'm actually falsely accused too. But I haven't told anyone here."

Douno widened his eyes in surprise.

"If I spoke up that I was innocent, people would only be annoyed with me. That's why I didn't say anything. And that's why I thought you were courageous for what you did."

"What did you get caught for, Mitsunashi?" Douno couldn't help but lean forward to listen.

"How do I say this? I guess he set me up—my acquaintance, I mean. We both agreed on our transaction, but he went and filed a complaint with the police. You know how the police take the victim's word as gospel, right? They didn't listen to a word I had to say. I was convicted for fraud."

Douno vividly recalled his own experience: the detective who had refused to listen, no matter how many times he had said he did not do it; the report, based entirely on the victim's word and created conveniently in the victim's favour. "Say if you're on a train," he had been told, "and you saw this young and beautiful lady in front of you. You wouldn't feel bad about it, would you?"

"I guess not," Douno had replied, figuring it was only small talk. But on the report, it was written, "A young woman came to stand in front of me, and I had a good feeling about her". This kind of crudely-written report had wielded absolute power in court.

"I just thought about how much you were like me, and I couldn't leave you alone," Mitsuhashi said. "Your sentence is short. I want you to hang in there and not lose faith in yourself."

Douno felt warmth rising from deep inside his chest. He had never imagined that someone would understand him so well. Unable to restrain himself, Douno spoke vehemently about how he had been mistaken as a molester, and what kind of investigations and court hearings he went through to get where he was now. He spoke passionately enough that his palms were sweaty by the time he finished. Then, Douno finally realized that he had wanted to be understood. He had wanted someone to relate to his feelings. He had wanted someone to listen.

Douno slumped as he stared vacantly into the distance, having expended all his energy on his story. Mitsuhashi lightly patted his shoulder. Douno cried a little, from the sense of release and comfort from spitting out all the unpleasantness that had accumulated inside him. For the first time since getting into prison, he felt like he had met someone who truly understood him.

Douno quickly grew close to Mitsuhashi. Once he knew that Mitsuhashi was falsely accused like he was—that he had not committed a crime—he could talk to him at ease, without having to be on guard. Once he had the chance to talk to Mitsuhashi, Douno realized they shared many of the same feelings.

"I go along with everyone because I don't want to isolate myself, but in truth I'm sick and tired of listening to people talk about stealing and drugs," he heard Mitsuhashi admit one day.

"I feel the same way," Douno found himself blurting in agreement. Although he had not noticed from talking to the other sentence servers, Mitsuhashi was actually well-versed in a wide range of things. He said he could speak English and Chinese from running a trading company.

Thus, by the time their scheduled haircuts rolled around in the beginning of November, Douno had made a friend he could open his heart to and was finally getting used to everyday life in the cell. Haircuts were given every twenty days, and this was Douno's third.

Douno woke up feeling glum on haircut days. He hated how they all came out with shaved heads, looking like middle-school boys. He felt like it was their trademark as inmates. The shave was always the topic of conversation in the evening after their haircuts—who got a close shave, whose hair was left relatively long; who looked good, who looked bad. As the men around him repeated the same maddening conversation over and over, Douno sat by himself reading a borrowed book. All the books had been exchanged with those of the factory next door the day before yesterday. Douno was drawn to the newer books and had trouble deciding on which one to read, but ended up picking a decade-old bestseller.

"I wonder why old man Tomi always does the haircuts? They should choose someone with a little more skill," grumbled Kumon as he wrinkled his nose in a scowl. He had had to use his own shaver to even out his asymmetrical sideburns.

"The guards probably figure no one would make a fuss with old man Tomi," said Shiba. "I

heard a brawl broke out before over a bad haircut. If it was a young one cutting my hair, I'd have no qualms about giving him a piece of my mind. But picking a fight with an old geezer who can barely stand—well, that would just give you bad rep.” He rubbed his head with a wry smile. “But my haircut could have been better.”

“Kitagawa’s the lucky guy this time. It’s cut straight, too.” Kumon mussed Kitagawa’s hair with a rough hand. Kitagawa narrowed his eyes with an annoyed look but said nothing.

“Maybe he’s easier to shave because his head is a nice shape,” murmured Mitsunashi. His eyes met with Douno’s. “So’s your head, Douno,” he said. Mitsunashi leaned over the table to stroke Douno’s hair.

“Whoa, your hair’s really soft! Is it naturally like that?”

“Stop it, it tickles,” Douno laughed. Mitsunashi laughed a little, too. Douno suddenly felt a pair of eyes on him. As he turned, his eyes met with Kitagawa’s. Those frighteningly expressionless eyes remained fixed on him. Just as Douno wondered what the man could want, Kitagawa’s gaze flitted away.

Then day after was bathing day. Bathing times varied, but when Douno was allotted a time later in the day, he would sometimes see grime floating in the bath water, to his disgust. Luckily, today he was bathing early and the water was clean. In the short fifteen minutes of bath time he was given, he quickly washed his body and hair, and sank into the bath. In reality, he was only able to soak for about five minutes before the guard gave him the signal to get out. He stepped out and made for the change room.

“Liar,” said a voice as Douno was towelling off his hair with his head down. He looked up to see Kitagawa standing beside him. A pair of expressionless eyes looked down at Douno.

“Mitsunashi,” Kitagawa said, then turned his face away. Douno cocked his head in perplexity at the cryptic message from a man he barely exchanged words with. Did he mean that Mitsunashi was a liar? But Mitsunashi was a good person, and not the type to lie. The man had gotten a refrain-from-bathing order today because he was feeling under the weather. It was almost as if Kitagawa had waited for a chance to speak when Mitsunashi was not around. It bothered Douno slightly, but not very much; by the time he returned to the cell, he had forgotten all about it.

The next day was exercise day. As usual, Douno sat with Mitsunashi against the wall and stared absent-mindedly at the inmates playing softball.

“Did Kitagawa...”

“What?” Mitsunashi asked him.

“What did Kitagawa do?”

“You mean what was he charged for?”

Douno nodded slightly. Mitsunashi looked like he knew, but was hesitating to put it into words.

“You know, don’t you?”

“I didn’t have to ask him personally—rumours are always coming in. What? Are you curious about him?”

“Well, kind of,” Douno said awkwardly. “The other day, he said ‘liar’ to me. Then, afterwards he said ‘Mitsunashi’, so it’s been bothering me a bit.”

“What, so he’s saying I’m a liar?” Sensing sharpness creeping into Mitsunashi’s voice, Douno feared that he had insulted the man.

“No, that’s not what I meant,” he said hastily. “It’s just... I’ve never talked with Kitagawa much. So when he said that to me out of the blue...”

“Douno,” Mitsunashi said gravely. “You should be careful about Kitagawa.”

“Be careful?”

"He's quiet and doesn't talk much, but he's a troublemaker. I hear he snaps suddenly and flies into a rage. Rumour has it he's been put in solitary confinement so many times that he can't even get out on parole anymore."

Kitagawa always seemed like the cool and disinterested type. Douno could not imagine him flying into a rage.

"I don't want to trash-talk my fellow cellmate, but you shouldn't be involved with him. He's not someone you wanna deal with. When there's someone he doesn't like, he snitches to the guard in charge. I know a bunch of people who've been thrown into solitary because Kitagawa ratted on them. He's frustrated because he won't get parole, so he goes around trying to take away everyone else's parole, too."

Lose my chance for parole? No way in hell am I doing that, Douno thought. A loud crack echoed in the air. The ball made a sweeping arc in the sky and disappeared into the distance. The batter was Kitagawa, and he broke into a run. As he made his leisurely way back to home base, Shiba and Kumon clapped him on the shoulders. He looked like he was enjoying himself.

"You know, when you're just sitting here like this, don't you sometimes wonder if we're really prisoners?" Mitsunashi murmured. "Even if they've killed people, there they are, still eating, sleeping, playing softball and laughing."

The word "murder" crossed Douno's mind. His eyes met with Mitsunashi, and the man pointed at the tall man with the expressionless face.

"This prison used to house mostly long-term inmates, but since the number of people with short sentences increased, they started letting those in too. Now this place is a mix of both. Our Factory 8 is mostly full of short-term people, but once in a while you get long-term ones like Kitagawa."

Douno had figured there would be people who had killed before—it was a prison, after all—but he had not expected to find out that such a man was in the same cell, sleeping right beside him.

"I didn't hear this directly from him," Mitsunashi continued, "but they say he didn't just stab the person once—he did it over and over."

The sun's rays were warm, yet Douno felt as if he had been thrown into ice water.

Once past mid-November, the chill in the mornings and evenings became harder to bear. There were heaters in the cell, but had supposedly never been touched since Mitsunashi came in. Douno was prone to feeling cold as it was; the idea that it was just going to get colder put him into a glum mood.

It was a chilly day, and had been raining since morning. Douno was called out by Mitsunashi at lunch break and taken to a corner of the bookshelves in the cafeteria.

"It looks like I can get out the day after tomorrow. Someone from the statistics factory gave me the news," he whispered. "Starting tomorrow, I'll be put into a solitary cell and I'll be forbidden to leave it. So it looks like today will be my last day working with you, Douno."

A man he could confide everything in was leaving—the thought of it suddenly made Douno feel forlorn. His anxiety evidently showed on his face, for Mitsunashi grinned wryly.

"If you get parole, you'll be out in three or four months too, Douno. Hang in there."

In all honesty, Douno could not say he was happy to hear of his friend's release. He reproached himself for feeling this way.

"All the best when you get out," he said anyway. Mitsunashi glanced around as if to gauge the people around him, then brought his lips to Douno's ear.

"I can't say this very loudly, but I've been thinking of doing this for a long time. I actually

think there are a lot of us out there who've been falsely charged. I've been thinking of gathering people who've suffered like us, and filing a lawsuit against the country. Douno, will you fight this with me when you get out?"

A battle to prove his innocence—something stirred inside Douno's heart. The fate he had resigned himself to was slowly beginning to change.

"I—I'd like to fight with you."

Mitsubishi grinned.

"I knew you'd say you would. This kind of pain can only be understood by those who've gone through it. I'll be waiting for you outside the fence."

Douno told Mitsubishi the address of his parents' home. When he asked Mitsubishi for his address, the man gave a sheepish smile and said he did not have an arrangement yet for when he got out of prison.

"Once March rolls around, I'll contact your family's house. Until then, I'll get the lawsuit ready."

Mitsubishi had remained a reliable friend right up until his last days in prison. He was transferred to a solitary cell the next day, and on the day following he was released from prison. Douno felt as if he had been left behind, but Mitsubishi had given him a goal to live. Before, he had no plans for when he got out of prison. But now, Douno felt he could endure any hardship in order to fight the evil that had wronged him.

The day after Mitsubishi was released, a new inmate called Kakizaki joined them. He was young—twenty-seven—and his crime was illegal possession of drugs. His sentence was two years. Kitagawa and Kakizaki were close in age, and for that reason, Kakizaki seemed to have taken a liking to Kitagawa. He took to calling Kitagawa "brother" and followed him around like the droppings trailing behind a goldfish. As for Kitagawa, he maintained disinterest and refused to get involved.

Kakizaki loved dirty talk, and constantly spoke about the form of the penis. His most boast-worthy feat was when he had sex for five straight days while high on stimulants. His profile carried no hint of intelligence as he spoke smugly of his deeds. What was more, he had a taste for men: he earned the dislike of his cellmates for approaching and propositioning them with the gravest of faces.

"You must be pretty frustrated. How about a round with me?" he had even suggested to Douno once. Douno did what everyone else did and ignored him. Kakizaki eventually stopped talking to him. In the showers, Douno sometimes spotted Kakizaki nearby with a flagrant erection, which made him sigh in exasperation.

Douno spent each day cautiously as to avoid a penalty that would influence his parole. If he kept it up, he would be able to get out on parole in mid-March of the next year.

His sentence was short—a mere "piss sentence", as Kumon put it—so his class never rose above fourth. Inmates had classes ranging from first to fourth, and the higher classes were allowed frequent monthly meetings and letters. Douno, who was in fourth class, was given one meeting and one letter allowance a month.

One day in the beginning of December, Douno was called out by the factory manager in the middle of his sewing work. He was told that someone was here to meet him. Douno was not happy to receive the news. He did want to see his family, but once he thought about how much their lives had changed because of him, he felt ashamed to look them in the face. But he could not just turn them back after they had come so far. Douno made his way to the meeting room.

His mother was the only one there. Back at the detention centre, Douno had worn his own

clothes for meetings, but here he was wearing his mouse-coloured factory uniform. He was the picture of a prisoner. He stared at his feet, ashamed that his mother had to see him like this.

"How are you?" Douno's mother had clearly lost weight since he entered prison. "You're not having a hard time?"

It's cold inside our group cell. I'm afraid my own heart will turn black from being surrounded by all these people who've done something wrong. We have too much time to spare, and all I can think about is what I'm going through. Think, think, think, and it feels my chest with pain.

—But if he told the truth, he would only make her worry. Douno shook his head.

"I'm fine. But mom, how are you feeling yourself? I heard you collapsed."

His mother's eyes welled with tears as she pressed a handkerchief to the corners of her eyes.

"You poor thing... you poor thing. Look at you. But it's alright. Everything will be alright now."

Douno felt a nagging sensation at his mother intently repeating the words "it will be alright".

"We asked Mr. Takamura to do anything in his power," Douno's mother. "Everything will be alright."

"Mom, who's Takamura?"

"Isn't he your friend from university?"

Douno sifted through his memory, but did not remember anyone called Takamura.

"Mr. Takamura works for the metropolitan police department. He said he heard about you through someone else, and came all the way over to our house because he was worried about you. He said if he had known about this earlier, he would have found a way to deal with it. He took it very personally. How nice of him."

Douno was not convinced. He did not know anyone called Takamura, and in university, he was in the Faculty of Science. No one in his faculty aimed to be employed by the police.

"Mr. Takamura said he knows seniors in the police department. He said he would ask them if they can arrange something for you. I gave him a token of gratitude. Everything will be alright."

Douno flinched at the words "token of gratitude".

"Mom, did you give him money?"

His mother nodded deeply. "This is for you, after all. He has to ask some very important people. We have to express our sincerity in some form, too."

"I don't know anyone called Takamura. Who is he? Mom, who did you give the money to?"

His mother's thin face paled before his eyes.

"But... but he said you knew each other..."

"What was he like?" Douno pressed urgently.

According to his mother, Takamura was short and bespectacled. A little on the heavy side, he was far from good-looking. But he looked respectable because he was wearing a suit.

"Mr. Takamura knew which jail you were in. Everyone knows you're in prison, but I haven't told anyone which one. That's why..."

"Mom, I've been convicted," Douno said shortly. "Once the sentence is finalized, nothing will change it. Even if it turns out I was falsely charged. Talking to higher-ups isn't going to do any good!"

"I—I didn't know," his mother protested weakly. Douno could see her hands clasped together so tightly that they were turning white.

"How much did you pay him? It's not too late. I want you to file a complaint. I can't believe you took his story seriously!" he exclaimed.

"We—we were only concerned for your good—"

"How much did you pay him?" Douno demanded.

"Three million¹," his mother murmured in a trembling voice. "I talked to your father about this. But we decided that we would do it for you."

His mother's voice gradually faded into the distance. Douno felt a slight onslaught of dizziness, and pressed a hand to his forehead.

Douno was intent on finding the man to whom his parents had paid a staggering three million yen. That man had clawed the money from them at a time when they were already suffering so much because of Douno's situation. Douno was incensed, but he had no idea who it could be. His parents and his sister were the only people who knew which prison he was in. As long as the three of them remained silent, no one else was supposed to have known.

While mulling over the different possibilities, Douno wondered suddenly if it may have been Mitsuhashi. But Mitsuhashi was neither short nor fat. Those physical features were hard to disguise; the man could not be him. Then who was it? Douno thought night and day of the man who had stolen three million from his parents.

Sewing at work about three days after his mother had come to see him, Douno caught himself trying to put the upper thread where the bobbin was supposed to go. The mistake jarred his nerves, but he figured it was just because he was lost in thought. But while fixing a spot he had sewed accidentally, Douno grabbed a pair of scissors thinking he was reaching for a seam ripper, and did not realize his mistake until he had cut a chunk of the cloth clean off. The succession of mistakes that he normally never made scared Douno and made him feel as if he were losing his mind. He knew that if he kept thinking about the three million, it would get to him. But no matter how much he tried to distract himself, every free moment he had, he found his thoughts gravitating back to it again.

After supper, Douno opened a borrowed book as usual. But he could not get past a single line. *Who tricked my parents?*—the thought circled round and round inside his head.

"Douno." Douno winced at being called, and looked up.

"Tomorrow's laundry day. You'll be putting your socks out for the wash, right?" Shiba waved a scrap of paper in his right hand. "If you're not gonna hand them in now, you'll have to put them in the laundry bag yourself tomorrow morning. I'll fill in your Laundry Request Slip in advance. Personal articles, right?"

"Yes."

Shiba gathered everyone's socks, bunched them with string, and put them in the laundry bag. Douno was overcome by an impulse to ask Shiba, not because Shiba had initiated the conversation, but because Douno was desperate to ask anyone who would listen.

"Um—"

Shiba turned around. "Don't wanna put it in the wash?" he asked, tilting his head.

"No... I... I wasn't talking about laundry. I wanted to ask you something."

"What is it?" Shiba placed the laundry bag down on the *tatami* mat.

"Normally, only your family would know which prison you're in, right?"

"No one else would know unless you tell them."

"I guess..." Douno lapsed into silence, just as Kumon came butting in.

"What? What is it? Something happen?"

1 3,000,000 Japanese yen is approximately 30,300 USD.

"No, it's not much..." Douno answered vaguely. He tried to change the topic, but Kumon and Shiba questioned him so persistently, he found himself opening his mouth again.

"Someone claiming to be my old friend visited my parents. He told them he was in the police department, and that he'd make arrangements for me. My parents went ahead and gave him a token of gratitude, even though—"

"Uhhh, 'token of gratitude'?" Kakizaki asked in a drawl. Kumon smacked him in the back of the head.

"Money, idiot. Cash."

"I see," Shiba said quietly, and gave Kumon a pointed look. Kumon also gave a furtive glance in Shiba's direction.

"Douno, you know it's against the rules here to tell anyone your address, or give someone else's address out." Shiba's voice was sombre.

"...I know."

"Did you tell someone?"

Mitsuhashi crossed his mind.

"Did you tell Mitsuhashi?" Kumon asked. Douno felt his heart jump.

"But it can't be Mitsuhashi," he protested. "The man that came to my house was short and heavyset. He and Mitsuhashi are completely different body types."

"Hmm," Shiba said as he crossed his arms. "Mitsuhashi is out on parole, right? If he gets caught doing something bad during that time, his sentence will be doubled. He's a smart one, so I can't imagine him crossing such a dangerous line."

"I think it's Mitsuhashi," Kumon said as he leaned across the table. "Your sentence's short, Douno, so you'll get out while he's still on parole. He wouldn't be able to pull that stunt once you got out, so he did it now. Maybe he got someone to do it for him, so it wouldn't be traced back."

"Ah, I didn't think about that," Shiba murmured.

As Douno listened to Shiba and Kumon talking, he too began to feel like it really had been Mitsuhashi. But the last thing he wanted to do was be suspicious of a man he had opened his heart to.

"But Mitsuhashi told me," he insisted. "He said he was under false charges, too. He was planning for us to file a lawsuit together after I got out."

"Mitsuhashi, under false charges? Bullshit," Kumon spat. "He's a fraud down to his bones. He was bragging about raking in cash from old people who live alone by doing door-to-door sales."

Douno felt like someone had pulled a black curtain over his eyes. So Mitsuhashi had not been falsely accused. They had not shared the same predicament after all. What had he meant when he said he wanted to fight together when Douno was released from prison? He vividly recalled his conversations with Mitsuhashi. Was he lying when he said he operated a trading company, and that he could speak foreign languages? Were his earnest attitude, his sympathetic nod, his words—"oh, I know", "of course, I understand"—all lies?

Come to think of it, the only times Mitsuhashi ever spoke about himself were when they were alone together at lunch or during exercise period. Since Mitsuhashi had mentioned not telling anyone about being false accused, Douno figured he had not wanted to be overheard by the rest of the inmates. But now that he thought about it, perhaps Mitsuhashi's secrecy was to avoid being overheard and exposed. When he left, he had also not told Douno his address. Perhaps he was lying about having no arrangements—perhaps he had intended not to tell Douno all along. One straight line connected every incident with the truth. Douno gaped in disbelief at the knots in the table, unable to close his mouth. He had been tricked.

Shiba came around behind him and placed a firm hand on his shoulder.

"Mitsubishi was a bastard, but you weren't careful enough, either, Douno. There are a lot of cases like that, where trusting inmates exchange addresses with each other, and one ends up being cheated by the guy who gets out first."

"I don't believe it," Douno whispered. He balled his hands into fists on the *tatami* mat and gritted his teeth. A despair more arresting than what he felt at the moment of his conviction overtook his body. Boiling wrath made him shake from head to toe.

"I'll—I'll take him to court!" He sprang up and reached for the buzzer to call the guard over, but was intercepted by Shiba.

"You have no proof," Shiba said firmly. "Even if you file a claim in court, all Mitsubishi has to say is that he has no idea, and that'll be the end of it. You, on the other hand, will be sent to solitary for unlawful communication because you told him your address. It'll affect your parole."

Douno sank back down onto the *tatami* mat. He knew who was responsible, yet he could do nothing. It was his own fault, yet he could do nothing.

"You've told your parents to file a complaint, haven't you? All you can do now is wait."

But if Mitsubishi was not caught—if he got away—Douno would have no choice but to admit defeat. Tears rolled down his face at the realization. His parents had already been pushed to the margins of the society by the fact that their son was in prison; Mitsubishi had added insult to injury by further syphoning three million yen from them. But Douno was even more angry that the man had used his trust to make money. *Fiend, thief, burglar, liar... liar....* Douno slowly raised his head. He caught the expressionless man in a corner of his eye and lunged at him, grabbing him by the front of his shirt.

"Oh—hey! Come on!" Shiba hastily pried Douno off Kitagawa.

"You knew!" Douno accused. "You knew Mitsubishi was going to—to trick me out of my money. Didn't you? Why didn't you tell me?" he demanded.

Kitagawa remained expressionless at Douno's angry outburst.

"Douno, lower your voice," Shiba warned. "If the guard comes—"

Douno ignored him. "Answer me!" he bellowed. Kitagawa smoothed the crumpled spot on his shirt where Douno had grabbed him, and gave a short exhale.

"I don't know anything." His voice was flat. "I don't know anything about it. I just told you that Mitsubishi is a liar because that's what he is."

The bell rang, signalling rest period before lights-out. At the same time, the window facing the hallway opened with a bang, the guard's face appearing through the bars.

"Hey! What's this noise about?" he barked.

Shiba stepped forward.

"I'm sorry," he said as he bowed his head. "I think the TV was turned up too high. We'll turn it down."

Deep creases appeared between the guard's eyebrows as he twisted his face into a scowl.

"You should know that television hours start after nineteen o'clock and only after nineteen o'clock. Are you saying you turned on the TV before designated hours?"

"I'm sorry, sir," Shiba apologized. "My daughter is sprinting in the national championships today. They're being held in Kobe, and I was worried about the weather."

Evidently the words "daughter" and "national championships" had some effect on the guard, for he let them off with nothing more than a warning.

"I don't care what reason it is," he snapped. "Watching television is forbidden outside of designated hours. Don't make me remind you again."

After the guard left, the other four cellmates began to fold up the table, lay out their futons,

and change into their pyjamas. Douno remained sitting on the floor in a trance. He knew he was being spoken to, but could not move. Shiba laid his futon out for him.

"Get your ass moving and change, or we'll get into trouble again," Kumon hissed. Douno finally changed into his pyjamas. "Don't forget to fold your uniform," Kumon added. "Look, I know you're in shock at being frauded, but our cell is going to lose TV privileges if we gets points docked because of you, alright?"

Douno folded his discarded uniform and slipped into his futon. Suddenly, a wave of tears surged from the depths of his body. He was fraught with guilt towards his parents—guilt and shame that such an enormous sum had been stolen because of his own carelessness. He cursed the wicked man who had tricked him. *If curses could kill*, he thought fervently, all the while mentally damning the man to hell. Vermin like Mitsunashi did not deserve to live. Douno felt like he could give his life for the opportunity to escape and kill Mitsunashi, or to have someone kill him in exchange.

Douno sank his teeth into his pillow to resist the urge to scream. He attacked the pillow again and again, as if he intended to tear it apart with his teeth. His jaw began to feel numb and his pillow turned sticky with saliva. He did not even notice Kumon and Kakizaki giving him disturbed looks.

His mind filled with the same words: "I hate him", "I want to kill him"—and somewhere in the midst of it, fleetingly, "I want to die". He wished he could. He had not only brought hardship upon his sister and parents, but he had done it twice, three times over. He attracted trouble merely by living. He knew he ought to disappear.

Douno dozed a little around dawn. It was the start of another normal day, yet he felt as if someone had wrapped a thin membrane around his mind. He felt only the vaguest sense that he was alive.

Douno did not touch his breakfast. Even after heading out to the factory and beginning his work, he felt absent-minded. Staring at the straight stitches made him feel like he was an unfeeling machine. He left his lunch untouched, and at supper, he sat without even bothering to take a pair of chopsticks from the box.

"Aren't you going to eat?" Shiba asked him. Douno did not care to answer.

When rest period came around, Douno immediately got into his futon. He spewed curses at Mitsunashi mentally, loathed himself for being stupid enough to be tricked, and contemplated the ways he could die.

Even dying was a challenge in prison. He could not do it in his group cell, for one. He thought of applying for a solitary cell, but had heard that applications by fourth-class inmates would not even be considered. He wondered if he could go to the washroom during work and hang himself there. He did not remember there being any rafters he could tie a rope to, so he decided he would check tomorrow.

Once he decided that he would kill himself, Douno felt a little better. But when he thought about the fact that he was going to die for a man like Mitsunashi, the base of his stomach burned with anger and frustration. However, he always came back to the thought that death would free him of this suffering, too—forever. Thus he settled on the decision that he did want to die after all.

The next morning, Douno ate just two bites of breakfast. He headed to the factory, and during his morning break he went to the washroom only to be disappointed. There were no rafters or nails he could hang a rope from. He thought of biting his own tongue, but did not have the courage to do it immediately. He also wanted to leave a will.

Douno ate half of his lunch before putting his chopsticks down. After cleaning up his dishes, he approached the bookshelf, but did not feel the urge to read anything. He saw no point in

it anymore. He gazed reflectively at his surroundings in the small cafeteria while feeling a touch of futility at the idea that his life's last moments would be inside a prison.

Somebody was approaching him. It was Natsuki, a man in his fifties who lived in the cell across from him. He smelled badly. It had gotten better with the arrival of winter, but when Douno had first come to prison, the man had reeked of vomit.

"Howdy, Douno," Natsuki said. Douno only remembered speaking a handful of words with the man. They were not close at all. Douno inclined his head slightly in acknowledgement. Natsuki smirked.

"So I heard Mitsuhashi screwed you out of a lot of money."

Douno could feel the saliva pass through his throat. It made a loud gurgle. How did Natsuki know? Douno had only told the members of his own cell.

"Who did you hear that from?"

Natsuki stuck a pinkie into his right nostril and dug a wad of something out.

"Kakizaki, the idiot. Said you're so done in you look like you're about to die." Natsuki guffawed, then whispered with stinking breath into Douno's ear. "The guy was telling me what a naive and straight-laced kid you are. He figured your prim-and-proper parents would have money saved up. Who'da known he'd be right on?"

"Y—You knew about this?"

"You bet I knew. He told me personally not to lay my hands on his prey."

Douno's balled fists were shaking.

"You could have warned me, at least," he said quietly. "Thanks to him, my parents are..."

Natsuki scoffed and hunched his shoulders.

"Why the hell should I care about your parents? You can blame yourself for getting reeled in."

Natsuki turned his back, apparently satisfied that he had said what he had come to say. In the next instant, Douno found himself grabbing Natsuki by the back of his collar. He forced the man to turn around, and swung a fist straight at his face. A dull crack resounded. The man staggered and fell over onto his back. Douno straddled him. As the man's face twisted in fear, Douno slugged him over and over.

"Douno, stop it!" Shiba grabbed him by the armpits from behind, but Douno wrestled free. As Natsuki tried to crawl away, Douno dragged him back by his ankles, took hold of the man's head and smashed it against the floor.

"The hell do you think you're doing?" bellowed a guard, appearing in a flash. The emergency alarm went off. Four guards came running, and in a manner of moments, they had restrained Douno's arms and legs.

"Let go! Let go of me!" Douno kept shouting until a towel was shoved into his mouth. When he continued to struggle, the guards mercilessly kicked him in the back and stomach. The pain made his breath catch and his movements stop. The guards took the chance to drag him out of the cafeteria.

Douno was taken to the interrogation room, where he was stripped of his factory uniform, underwear and all. He was changed into something that resembled a lab coat and a pair of underwear with an open seam in the crotch. Next, he was outfitted with a type of leather belt with leather wrist restraints, which secured his right hand behind him and his left hand in front. When he would not stop yelling, he was also muzzled with some kind of material.

Douno was half-dragged by two guards to the basement, and thrown into an empty room only about three square metres in area. All the walls were lined with a soft sponge-like material. The floor was linoleum, like an old hospital. Douno continued to scream through his gag, banging

his head against the walls and floor numerous times as he tumbled around, until he finally stretched out, exhausted. Only then did he realize that he was in some kind of “secure cell”.

Once the inferno of his rage had passed, he was overwhelmed by listlessness and powerlessness. Douno pressed his face against the linoleum floor and wept. Mucus and tears ran freely from his nose and eyes, but since his arms were secured he could not even wipe his face. Soon, exhausted from weeping too, he passed out into a deep sleep.

He did not know how long he had been asleep for—but he awoke to a violent chill and a strong urge to urinate. There was nothing in the room which resembled a toilet; there was only a single hole in the floor about ten centimetres wide in the right corner of the room. Douno remembered someone mentioning that the toilet in a secure cell was just a hole. He walked over to the hole and squatted down, and his penis slid out from the open seam in his underwear. Without his hands, it was hard to aim his penis. As he fumbled, soon he could not hold it anymore; he ended up wetting the floor around the hole and even splashed a little of his foot. His feeling of despair worsened, and Douno curled up like a cat in a corner of the room. He wanted to die. He had been planning to. Why did it have to end up like this?

Douno did not want to think of anything. But in this empty space, there was nothing he could do other than think.

For three days, Douno was left alone with his leather wrist restraints and gag. On the fourth day, there was an interrogation. Douno was sentenced to a punishment called “light solitary confinement” for a week. During factory work hours, he had to remain sitting either cross-legged or on his knees in his secure cell.

His wrist restraints and gag were taken off, but he had no one to talk to, no work to do; it was a living hell to sit all day in a space devoid of any stimuli whatsoever. The only things that marked the passage of time were his three meals daily. He was chronically dizzy, and became prone to tripping and falling while on his feet. Douno felt his body slowly beginning to break down. Sitting in silence, he began to hear a buzzing in his ears that refused to leave, and persisted into the night.

On the evening seven days after he was sentenced to solitary confinement and ten days after he was placed in the secure cell, Douno was finally allowed to go back to his group cell. The ringing in his ears showed no signs of disappearing even after his return. In the secure cell, he had longed to hear any human voice, but now whenever he heard a voice he felt like covering his ears.

Shiba and Kumon tried to talk to him, but Douno refused to answer. He did not want to, and he was afraid of associating with people. People were not normal here. Everyone here manipulated and betrayed each other. The prison guards were the same: they had put him into a secure cell without so much as a decent investigation, had bound his wrists with leather, and had not even allowed him to wipe his excrement after he had relieved himself. Douno felt like this place had stripped every last shred of shame from him.

The next morning after returning to the group cell, Douno shaved his face for the first time in eleven days. The man in the mirror had hollowed cheeks and sunken eyes, and looked almost like a ghost. He felt disgust well up inside him, and before he knew it he had shattered the mirror with his bare fist. The mirror broke with a loud crash. Douno stood dumbly in front of the destroyed remains. In an instant, Shiba had grabbed the electric razor from him and sent him sprawling to the floor with a shove.

“What the hell is going on?” yelled a guard, who had come running at the noise.

“I’m sorry, sir. I was shaving and I bumped my elbow against the mirror. I’m very sorry. I’ll

clean it up immediately. I'll pay for the broken mirror out of my wages." Shiba apologized profusely with Douno's razor in hand. The guard seemed convinced that it was not done on purpose, and made Shiba clean up the broken fragments under his supervision before collecting the dustpan and broken glass and taking it away. After the guard left, Shiba gave a short sigh and turned back to Douno.

"You alright? Your hand isn't hurt or anything?" he asked gently.

Douno's spine froze at his kind tone. He half-trembled, half-shook his head, and fled to a corner of the room.

"How about a 'thank you', huh?" Kumon snapped. "You were about to be sent right back into solitary." Douno's mind did not register his words. Instead, his suspicions towards Shiba burgeoned. Why didn't Shiba leave him alone? Why did he insist on helping? Perhaps this man was approaching him with a friendly face, only to trick him when he opened up. Douno grew paranoid.

Roll call was immediately afterwards, followed by breakfast. Douno's hands shook badly as he held his chopsticks. He could only finish half of his meal, which he threw up in the washroom not long afterwards. At the factory, he had trouble getting anything done. He could not sew straight. His hands shook, and he sewed the same seam over so many times that he ruined the cloth.

He ran into Natsuki at lunchtime in the cafeteria. When their eyes met, Natsuki visibly flinched and looked away. Back in the secure cell, Douno had loathed this man so much he felt he could kill him, but now all the aggression had vanished somewhere.

Rather, Douno wished he could die. He wanted to die and be freed from his suffering. He did not want to stay here a second longer. He wanted a way out, even if it meant being taken out as a corpse.

Douno barely ate his lunch, and whatever he ate he soon threw up. It was bathing day that day, and to no one's surprise he lost consciousness and keeled over in the showers. He was taken to the infirmary, where he dozed for about three hours. He was deemed to be in regular health, and sent promptly back to his cell. It was suppertime when Douno returned, but again, he could barely eat even half.

Even sitting made him tired, but since he was not allowed to lie down, he put his head down on the table. During his time in the secure cell, he had yearned desperately for even a single book to read; now that he was in a situation where he could, he did not even feel like picking one up. Finally, nineteen o'clock rolled around and it was time for rest period. Douno remained leaning listlessly against the wall, so Shiba put out his futon for him. Kumon told him to get changed, so he changed into his pyjamas. Even after he got inside his futon, his ears were still buzzing and his mind was muddled and hazy.

"Think he's a goner?"

"Shh!"

Douno could vaguely hear the conversations about him. He was insane. He had gone mad. He was probably done for. His eyes were closed, but time passed by without bringing sleep. A trigger could be anything. His feet were not getting warmer at all. Even a small thing like that was enough to make tears well up in his eyes. He rolled over on his stomach, buried his face into his pillow, and wept. Quiet footsteps approached, and stopped in front of the cell. Douno lifted his face at the sound of the window opening, and saw the night guard staring at Douno through the bars.

"If you're going to cry about it, make sure you never end up here again."

If he had really done something bad, perhaps those words would have deeply affected him.

But there was simply no way Douno could feel remorse when he had been forced into this place for doing nothing.

Was it wrong that he had ventured to believe someone in prison? Was everything wrong right, and everything right wrong in this place? Were words like “common sense” and “justice” simply nonexistent here?

After the guard walked away, Douno slowly propped himself up. He stared vacantly at the wall for some moments before he slipped out of his futon and stood in front of the sink and mirror.

A blurry shadow emerged from the darkness. Douno tried banging his forehead against the corner of the mirror. He felt something warm and runny, but peculiarly, it did not hurt. He banged his head over and over until a voice yelled from the hall window.

“What’re you doing over there?” Douno turned around to see a guard glowering as he shone a flashlight at him.

The words “secure cell” crossed Douno’s mind. He vividly recalled being bound by leather handcuffs and being thrown into that place. *I don’t want to be put in there again*—just as the thought occurred, Douno found himself bowing his head to the guard.

“I’m sorry, sir. I’m sorry. I was going to the washroom, and I slipped... I fell down. I’m sorry for making noise. I won’t do it again. I’m sorry.”

The night guard gave him a doubtful look and shone the light on Douno’s face.

“What happened to your forehead?”

“This is... I slipped and hit my head on a corner.”

The night guard apparently thought it too troublesome to pursue further.

“Be careful next time,” he said shortly before walking on. The commotion had woken Shiba and Kitagawa, who were now looking this way.

“I’m sorry for making noise.” Douno lowered his head to them both in a clumsy bow, and slipped back into his futon. As he stared up at the ceiling, tears streamed from the corners of his eyes and did not stop. If he sobbed, it would make noise. If he got a reprimand from the guard, he would be deducted points again. If they lost ten points or more, television would be banned for the whole cell. Everyone would blame him. Sorrow seeped through the cracks of the reality of losing television privileges. Douno felt such utter futility that he felt his jaw would come unhinged.

His very existence, his thirty years living a more-or-less decent life, seemed so insubstantial. Soon he began to wonder if he really wasn’t equivalent to trash. He didn’t care who—he wanted someone to save him. He wanted someone to take him out of here. He wanted someone to say he wasn’t wrong about anything, that he was right. Tears accumulated inside his ears. *Help me, help me, help me...* he repeated in his heart.

He heard footsteps approaching from far away. At nighttime, it was easy to sense footsteps, no matter how quietly the person walked. Probably because of the previous commotion, the guard carefully shone the light into every corner of the cell before moving on. Douno waited long enough until he thought the guard had gone. He opened his eyes and glanced over to the hall window, and was startled to find Kitagawa staring back from the futon beside him.

Douno felt awkward as realized that the man must have seen him blubbering. He turned his face up and closed his eyes. Even with his eyes closed, the tears kept running down his cheeks. Suddenly, something swelled in his throat and threatened to burst out of his mouth. Douno sank his teeth into his wrist. If he didn’t, he felt like he would forget the time and place and begin screaming. Once the storm of emotions passed, he let go of his wrist. Unable to close his mouth, he left it half-open as he gazed at the ceiling. His jaws began to chatter as if he were in the cold.

“Help me, help me, help me, help me, help me, help me, help me, help me....”

Douno did not realize he was speaking out loud until he felt his lips trembling. He could

feel the curses oozing out of his body. A gentle hand was placed on his head, and Douno snapped his eyes open. The hand slowly stroked his hair. It repeated the same movements over and over, as if to soothe a very young child. There was no mistake; it was the man beside him. Douno pulled his futon up to his eyes. If he was found sleeping with his face covered, he knew would get a warning from the guard. He knew, but could not bring himself to show his face again.

His tears spilled over and refused to stop, flowing even more freely than before, but Douno could not understand why.

Morning came, and only then did Douno realize he had nodded off.

"Uhhh, whut happened t'your forehead?" drawled Kakizaki. Douno smoothed it over with the excuse that he had tripped and fallen last night.

Kitagawa was the same as ever. He had comforted Douno, but did not seem to expect any acknowledgement for it. Douno, frankly, was grateful. Crying usually only made his exhaustion accumulate, but this morning his chest felt lighter as if a great load had been taken off. This was despite the fact that his circumstance had not changed since yesterday.

He was hungry, so he cleaned off his plate at breakfast. When they headed out to the factory, Douno found himself not having to rip his stitches and sew them over and over again. At this rate, he would be able to finish the morning's quota in time for lunch.

I guess I should at least say thanks, Douno thought while he worked. Kitagawa's silence did not change the fact that Douno had indeed been comforted by that touch last night. *Yeah, but*, whispered his other self. *Isn't this Kitagawa's plan?* Perhaps he was only showing a little kindness to make Douno feel indebted, and once Douno humbled himself and thanked him, Kitagawa would demand exorbitant compensation. Kindness did not always simply equate to goodwill here. Just because someone seemed nice, it did not mean that they actually were. The incident with Mitsuhashi had taught Douno more than enough of that.

On one hand, Douno was apprehensive, but on the other hand, he was sick of himself for doubting everything. What if Kitagawa had comforted him out of pure goodwill, out of sympathy? Douno's honest wish was to thank him, and he felt Kitagawa was deserving of no less. But he did not want to be tricked again.

Douno was still mulling things over when lunch rolled around. He made his way to the cafeteria and sat down. They had shifted seats since Douno first arrived, but he was still beside Kitagawa as usual. Today's meal was *oyakodon*², with a side of bean sprouts dressed in sesame and two *shishamo*³ fish. Some devoured it in five minutes flat, but Douno slowly chewed on his mouthful of barley rice.

He was preoccupied with the actions of the man beside him, perhaps because he was thinking so hard about whether he should thank him or not. Kitagawa also ate very quickly, and never left anything uneaten. But today, his chopsticks stayed paused above the fish. They wandered a little as if in uncertainty, then, in one decisive move, Kitagawa whisked the fish up and stuffed the both of them at once into his mouth. He screwed his eyes shut, and deep creases formed between his eyebrows as he chewed intently. Inmates were not punished for leaving their meals uneaten; Douno wondered why Kitagawa did not just leave the fish if he hated it so much. But at the same time, he was amused by the sight of the man pulling a face as he ate.

2 Chicken, onions, and eggs flavoured with sweet-salty sauce and served on top of rice.

3 *Spirinchus lanceolatus*. A small, flavourful fish about the length of a human hand, often served salted and grilled whole.

Once their meal was over, Kitagawa began to watch the television installed in the wall. He showed no signs of picking up a book or chatting with someone else. Come to think of it, even in their cell, Kitagawa would always stand in a circle of chatting inmates without ever speaking up on his own. Their cellmates Kumon, Shiba, and Kakizaki, on the other hand, were currently completely occupied in their conversations with people from other cells.

The television was playing a show that was apparently geared towards middle-aged or older housewives, for words like “health” and “cholesterol” were being thrown around frequently.

“Um—”

Kitagawa turned around. His emotionless eyes looked almost angry, and Douno was put on guard.

“About last night... er, thank you.”

Kitagawa twitched his right eyebrow and cocked his head.

“It made me feel a bit better, so....”

“Mm-hmm,” Kitagawa said as if it were none of his business, and turned back to the TV. It was not like Douno had expected anything. He thought maybe the man would at least say “that’s nice” out of politeness, but there was none of that. Gazing at the aloof and taciturn man, Douno felt like the person who had stroked his head last night was someone totally different. He was even more stumped about why the man had chosen to comfort him. He could read nothing of the man’s intent from his profile.

“Aren’t you gonna read?” The man abruptly turned to ask him. Douno, who had assumed the man was watching TV all along, was startled by the sudden question. He tripped over his words as he answered.

“Wh—huh? Read?”

“You always read after you eat.”

“Oh, right. Maybe not today, though.”

“Mm-hmm.”

Kitagawa turned back to the TV. The man’s abrupt timing made it strangely difficult to carry a conversation. Douno was just reflecting on the thought when the man spoke up again.

“Why did you say thank you to me?”

He was bringing back a conversation that Douno assumed had long ended. He looked down and clasped his hands again, trying to deal with the awkwardness of being asked to explain his gratitude.

“Well, because I thought I ought to.”

“Mm-hmm,” Kitagawa said in answer, and shifted his eyes back to the TV again. *What a strange guy*, Douno thought, and before long, lunch was over. As they took roll call and got back to work, Douno reached a conclusion of sorts in his mind. Yes, Kitagawa was a little peculiar, but that was to be expected. After all, he would not have killed someone if he was a normal human being with common sense. Feeling strangely satisfied, Douno engrossed himself in his work.

The incident happened at suppertime. Today’s meal was fried chicken, Chinese-style vegetable soup, kimchi, and an apple. It was Douno’s first time having fried chicken since getting into prison, and for once the meal was delicious.

Even Kumon, who always had something to complain about the food, munched contentedly. “This is good stuff,” he beamed. Douno also went straight for the two pieces of chicken without so much a glance at the rest of his meal. It was odd—he felt like the act of eating and the ability to think it delicious was directly connected to being alive.

“Is the chicken good?” a voice beside him asked. Douno looked over to see Kitagawa with one piece of chicken left on his plate. *You’ve eaten one yourself*, he thought, but answered anyway.

"Yeah, it's good."

Kitagawa then picked the last piece of chicken off his plate and plopped it onto Douno's. Douno felt the blood recede from his face. He hastily turned to look behind him, ensured that the guard was not looking, and threw the chicken back at Kitagawa.

Sharing meals was strictly forbidden in prison. This was to prevent stronger inmates from bullying the weaker ones out of their food. If inmates were caught exchanging food, even on mutual agreement, they were given a warning. Sometimes they could get a ticket, or worse, given a formal reprimand.

Once an inmate was sentenced to punishment, his parole was pushed back for half a year. Since Douno's sentence was short to begin with, his last reprimand resulted in him losing his parole altogether. He now had to serve his full sentence. Any number of tickets or reprimands would not prevent his release from prison, but Douno wanted to spend the few months of his sentence in peace, and he wanted to do everything in his power to avoid being marked out by the guard in charge.

Kitagawa gazed alternately at Douno's face and the rejected chicken, then popped the chicken into his mouth. He finished eating it without another word. Maybe this man was trying to get him into trouble. Douno renewed the apprehension in his heart. Just because the man had done a kind deed or two, it did not mean that he could trust him. He was the kind of man to end up here, after all. He was not a man Douno could afford to let his guard down around.

Douno finished his meal and flipped open the weekly magazine that had just arrived. He had completely forgotten that he had ordered it at the beginning of the month. The insect-like buzzing in his ears was fading, and he could now concentrate well enough to read.

Douno suddenly shivered as he felt a chill come on. He sneezed twice in a row. It had been cold in the secure cell, and since then he had begun to sneeze occasionally. Douno wished he could curl up in a blanket, but he knew he would get a warning if he was caught using a blanket before rest hours.

Douno flipped through the magazine, looking for something that might distract him from the cold. He found a crossword puzzle. He had picked a pencil off the shelf and was just about to get started on it when a hand appeared and slammed the magazine shut. It was Kitagawa. Douno felt a twinge of irritation, but felt it too troublesome to argue. He opened the page to the crossword puzzle again. Once more, the hand appeared and flipped the magazine shut, this time resting on the cover as if to prevent him from opening it again. Having it done once was irritating; by the second time, it was getting on Douno's nerves.

"Please don't give me a hard time," he said quietly, suppressing his anger. The hand holding the book down refused to budge. When he tried to pry Kitagawa's hand off by force, Kitagawa only put more weight onto it. The two glared at each other silently.

"Alright, alright, that's enough, you two," intervened Shiba, who had apparently been watching their exchange. "Kitagawa," he remonstrated, "you have to put it into words, or else Douno won't understand." Then, he turned to look at Douno.

"You see," he said, "we aren't allowed to do crossword puzzles. If you're caught doing one, you'll be sentenced to punishment."

Douno was startled to hear the word "punishment".

"God knows why," Shiba added, "but I think someone must have used it in the past as some kind of code to try to communicate with people outside."

Douno had not expected something as innocent as this to be a target for a reprimand. It was not like he was dying to do the crossword anyway, and he did not want to take any unnecessary risks. Douno flipped the crossword page closed and looked at his feet in embarrassment. He could

not look the other man in the face. Kitagawa had been warning him out of kindness all this time. But there was no way Douno could have understood that crosswords were not allowed if Kitagawa did not say anything—he felt a flash of anger at the man’s lack of verbalization, then immediately regretted his selfishness. If Kitagawa had not told him at all, Douno would have been punished.

When he looked up, his eyes met with Kitagawa’s. Judging by his expression, he seemed to be expecting Douno to say something.

“I’m sorry I misunderstood. Thanks for telling me.”

Kitagawa narrowed his eyes.

“Mm-hmm,” he said softly. Douno felt like the man was mocking him, and instantly regretted apologizing.

Douno’s feet were still cold when rest period came around and he got into his futon. No matter how much he rubbed them together, they did not warm up. He fell asleep preoccupied with the cold, and was not surprised to wake up the next morning with a runny nose.

That day turned out to be one of the two medical checkups that occurred weekly. Douno requested for cold medicine when the caretaker came around in the morning, but since his body temperature was only thirty-seven degrees, he was given a “bathing ban” by the medical officer and was let go without any medicine. Douno had a history of long colds, and he was worried about what was to come. Unfortunately, his predictions came true.

Douno’s joints began to ache in the afternoon, and he felt his temperature rising. He felt heavy and lethargic. He had no appetite. He forced himself to eat to maintain energy, but threw it back up soon afterwards.

His head was pounding and his nose would not stop running. Unable to endure any more, Douno rang the buzzer. Within minutes, a guard’s face appeared at the window.

“What is it?” he said.

“Number 145, Douno, sir.” He bowed to the officer beyond the metal bars. “I have a headache and my nose won’t stop running. Would I be able to get some cold medicine, sir?”

The guard glared at him.

“Didn’t you report to the medical officer today?”

“I asked for a checkup, sir. But I was only given a bathing ban and no medication.”

“If a bathing ban is what the medical officer decided, then that’s what you’ll get. You must have caught a cold because you lacked discipline.”

Don’t call me for such insignificant things, the guard’s arrogant attitude seemed to say. Douno was struck speechless. Once the guard was gone, Shiba spoke up behind him.

“You won’t be able to get medication,” he said quietly. “It’ll have to get pretty serious until they’re willing to give you any. They won’t even put you in a normal hospital until you’re nearly dead. You’ll just have to wait until the next checkup.”

Douno sank down in despair. He had no choice but to endure it. He was unwell, yet they refused him medication. He even felt anger creeping up at the state of Japan’s prisons. What would they do, then, if an ill inmate died because they neglected him?

He felt a violent chill down his spine. If he died, that would be it. Dead men did not need food. *Inmate No. 145 happened to catch a cold, and unfortunately for him it worsened and led to his death. The end.*

Douno waited longingly until rest period came at nineteen o’clock, and got into his futon. He lay shivering, and his nose was still running. They were given only a set amount of tissues weekly for blowing their noses. Douno could not afford to waste them, so he used each tissue until it was soaked with mucus. When he ran out of tissues, he had no choice but to use his towel. But even that soon turned sticky and wet. Douno was forced into the miserable situation of wiping his

snot with his own snot. Even after lights-out, the only sound in the cell was that of Douno's sniffing. He knew the night guard could unmistakably hear it, too, but the guard did not say anything.

After the quiet footsteps receded into the distance, something soft touched Douno's face. He wondered what it was, and realized it was a tissue. Someone else's, because he had used up all of his own. He opened his eyes through his hazy consciousness and saw Kitagawa peering into his face.

Exchanging items between inmates was forbidden. Even for something as small as a single tissue, if they were caught, they were punished. The amount of tissues supplied weekly was not a large amount. If one ran out from giving too many away, he could ultimately even face difficulties wiping his bottom in the toilet. Once he thought of that, Douno felt guilty about being given Kitagawa's precious tissues.

Kitagawa sat up slowly and snatched Douno's snot-laden towel away. He took it to the sink and began to wash it. They were only allowed to wash their towels twice a week at designated times. Washing without permission in the middle of the night was absolutely against the rules. Douno fretted, but Kitagawa paid no mind to him. He continued to wash the towel, letting the water run only so much as to not make noise, then placed the towel on Douno's forehead. The cold, moist towel was so soothing, the comfort seemed to penetrate to his brain.

"Thank you." Douno's nose ran even as he said those words, and he blew his nose into what was presumably Kitagawa's tissue. "I'm sorry for using yours up. Really..."

He heard quiet footsteps. Kitagawa removed the towel from Douno's forehead, and hid it under the uniform folded by his pillow. When the footsteps faded away, he placed it back on Douno's head.

"You know, you don't have to do this," Douno whispered. "If the night guard finds you, you'll get put into solitary. I mean it, really..."

Douno refused two more times after that, saying "it's okay", but Kitagawa did not let up. Douno eventually fell asleep, still sniffing wetly. When he came to, it was morning.

His nose continued to run after he awoke, and he felt dizzy. For breakfast, he only drank his *miso* soup and left the rest untouched. Work was not very taxing since most of it was done sitting down, but the factory was freezing. He shivered violently even while wearing a knitted top and bottom underneath his uniform. As he sewed soft, thick woollen ladies' coats, he longingly imagined how nice it must feel to curl up in one of them and lie down.

Lunch was curry rice, but Douno had no appetite. It came with apple salad and milk dressing, which was the only thing he could manage to eat. Just as he was about to put his spoon down leaving his curry untouched, a hand reached over and quickly switched his plates. The apple salad with milk dressing which he had just eaten was taken away, and a new plate of apple salad was placed before him. Kitagawa, having observed that it was the only thing Douno could eat, and had given his own portion to him. The factory guard was not looking this way.

"Th—thank you." Douno ate the apple salad without complaining. As he ate, he wondered why Kitagawa had been so kind to him, last night as well as the night before. Perhaps the fried chicken, too, which Douno had thought was a plan to get him into trouble, had been out of kindness.

Once their meal was over, Douno walked unsteadily to the sinks to deposit his dishes. He wanted to sit down, but Kitagawa grabbed his arm on the way back. He was taken to the bookshelves at the back of the cafeteria. He was yanked on the arm and forced into a squatting position.

"Is this book interesting?" Kitagawa was showing him a photo book called *Temples of Japan*.

Douno wanted to sit down and rest, but could not ignore the man who had been so kind to him.

"I haven't read it," Douno replied, still squatting. Kitagawa brought his hand up to Douno's face and opened his palm. There were three white pills in his hand. Kitagawa tilted Douno's chin up and pressed his hand against Douno's mouth. Still unable to fathom what was going on, Douno let the pills fall into his mouth and swallowed them along with his spit. He could not bring himself to ask what kind of pills they were. There was no way he could ask here, anyway. But by the afternoon, his runny nose had definitely subsided a little.

Once the long day was over, he returned to the group cell. With an effort, he managed to eat half of his dinner. Unable even to read a book, he had put his head down on the table when Kitagawa pulled at his arm again. He was taken to the shelves, where he was discreetly given three pills again. Douno swallowed them quickly. Once he had taken them, Kitagawa returned to the table as if nothing had happened, sat down cross-legged on the floor cushion and listened in on Shiba and Kumon's conversation.

At night, Douno felt his fever rising again. His nose was not running as much, thanks to the medication, but his head ached. Once it was lights-out, Kitagawa found time in between the night guard's rounds to wet a towel and cool Douno's forehead. Douno's nose had not completely stopped running, and before long he was sniffing again. Since he had used up all of Kitagawa's tissues, Douno tried his best to get by without blowing his nose. Suddenly, Kitagawa reached over and pinched Douno's nose.

Douno was surprised when the man then used his palm to wipe his nose. Like he had done with the towel, Kitagawa waited for the right opportunity to slip out and wash his hand. When Douno started sniffing again, he repeated the same thing. Douno was sure that even a lover or parent would balk if asked to do the same thing. He knew he would. Kitagawa was neither a parent nor a lover. They were not even close. Why was he being so kind? Douno found himself deeply moved, even, by Kitagawa's compassion.

"I'm so sorry," he whispered. "But thank you."

"Mmm," Kitagawa said, in an answer that was hardly an answer, and continued caring for Douno without a word. No one could be this considerate superficially—perhaps Kitagawa was really kind, Douno thought. Even if it turned out to be false, Douno felt like he could at least believe that Kitagawa's actions at this very moment were true.

Thanks to the pills he was given in the morning, noon, and evening, Douno's cold passed its worst stage, and he began to recover little by little. By the time the next checkup day came, his condition had improved so much, he felt like he would not need medicine at all. His gratitude towards Kitagawa was more than words could describe, and he was unsure of how to express it.

Kitagawa was a man of few words, and when he did speak, he was often brusque; he also rarely initiated conversations with Douno. But Douno came to feel that perhaps this man had taken a liking to him. For example, when they were served one of the tastier dishes at mealtime, Kitagawa never failed to share his portion with Douno. Douno never asked for it; Kitagawa simply transferred some onto Douno's plate when no one was looking. Douno thought perhaps Kitagawa did it to everyone, but it did not seem to be the case. The man was generous and kind, but never asked for anything in return. Douno felt relieved to know that there was someone in his life who would help him out of goodwill when he was ill or troubled. Compared to when he had been unable to trust anyone else, Douno felt very much put at ease.

It was the end of December, their last exercise day of the year. Douno's lengthy cold had recently gone away at last, and he was reluctant to go out into the cold grounds. But in order to be

excused, he was told that he had to write a request slip to the guard in charge and get a medical exam, which seemed like too much trouble.

Sections 1 and 4 had begun to play softball. Douno's Section 3 was not playing that day. Douno chose a sunny spot in the field with with not much wind, did some light stretches, then sat down with his back against the wall.

The blue sky was lofty and the wind was nippy. As of late, Douno had taken after his cellmates and made a calendar in his notebook. As each day passed, he coloured in one square. At first, he felt only weariness as he watched his cellmates at the task, but now he understood how they they felt as they filled in each day. As his remaining days grew fewer, his impending release seemed to feel more real by the day. Once he could see the end, he felt a renewed strength to go on.

Kitagawa was walking in his direction. Douno wondered if he was heading towards him. He was. Kitagawa moved upwind of him—whether out of coincidence or consideration, Douno did not know—and quietly sat down.

Thus Kitagawa had come over, but he showed no signs of attempting to start a conversation. In the same way that he watched television, Kitagawa stared blankly at the teams playing softball.

"Too bad there was no game today, huh?"

Kitagawa turned around.

"Not really," he said in a detached voice.

"But you always look like you're enjoying yourself. I'm bad at ball games, so I'm envious of you."

"Softball isn't really fun. They tell me to play because I'm young, so I do."

Douno was taken aback by Kitagawa's short, unfacilitating answer. He had figured all along that Kitagawa played because he enjoyed it.

"If you don't like to play, why don't you say so to everyone? I don't think you have to force yourself."

Kitagawa looked at Douno's face.

"It's easier just to do what I'm told."

Yes, perhaps it was easier to get on with life here if one just did as he was told, without protesting.

"But isn't it stressful for you, doing things against your will?"

"What's stress?" Kitagawa asked with a straight face. Douno was at a loss for words.

"You know, like when things don't go the way you want, or when so many bad things happen in a row that you start to feel unstable."

Kitagawa tilted his head in perplexity.

"You don't get what I mean?" Douno suddenly wondered how much schooling Kitagawa had received. Even elementary school kids these days knew what stress was.

"Everything is already decided for me, from morning 'til nighttime. I get three square meals a day. As long as I'm cautious, I won't get into trouble. I don't have to think about anything."

The way Kitagawa spoke almost sounded like he was condoning the lifestyle here. *Wait a second*, Douno questioned mentally.

"But don't you get sick of such a restricted life, where everything is rigidly structured? Once you get out, you'll be free. No one will order you around. You'll be free to do whatever you like and no one will humiliate you."

"Mm-hmm," Kitagawa murmured his usual reply. "Everyone says they want to get out of here. I wonder what they hate so much about this place?"

I just finished talking about how people hate having their freedom taken away, Douno thought, but

the message had apparently not gotten across to Kitagawa at all.

"Hey." Kitagawa looked up at Douno with his head still on his knees. "Say 'thank you'."

Douno wondered what in the world this man was saying. Besides, words of gratitude were not things you forced out of people. Nevertheless, Douno bundled all of the past kindnesses Kitagawa had given him until now, and said, "Thank you."

"You know, you have so many different 'thank you's," Kitagawa said. "While you're crying, or laughing, or sometimes looking a little worried." He kicked up the dirt on the field with his heel. "Do normal people usually say 'thank you' so much?"

"Normal people?"

"Shiba said you were a normal guy. But nobody's ever said 'thank you' to me much before."

How old is Kitagawa? Douno thought. He was twenty-eight, if memory served him correctly. He was far into adulthood, yet spoke like a child barely of age. Douno did not know how to answer him.

"It feels good when you say 'thank you' to me," Kitagawa continued. "I want you to say it more. Will you? I promise I'll do more things to make you happy."

It was absolute nonsense.

"That's not right," Douno said. "You don't give kindness and consideration to get words in return."

"I don't care about the emotional stuff. You just have to say 'thank you' to me and it'll be fine. I put money in the vending machine like I should, don't I?"

Douno could not hide his astonishment. Did Kitagawa see his own kindness towards Douno as some kind of currency? Douno felt like the kindness bestowed upon him was now a mere systematic action. He was shocked as he realized that Kitagawa's deeds had actually carried no real sympathy whatsoever.

Kitagawa looked up at the sky and took a breath.

"I have tissues coming at the end of the month. I bought a lot of them with my wages. I'll give them all to you. So make sure you say 'thank you'."

Douno thought about what kind of man Kitagawa was. It was clear that his way of thinking was more than a little abnormal, but strangely, Douno did not feel compelled to break off his association with him.

Douno even saw a sort of innocence in the man when he thought of how Kitagawa had taken care of him all night with nothing in mind but earning those two small words of thanks. When children first thought of doing a kind deed to someone, perhaps it was something as simple as the desire to be praised or to make someone happy. If Douno regarded Kitagawa's thought processes as those of a child, he felt like he could get a slightly better grasp of them. The only problem was that Kitagawa was twenty-eight, and well into his adult years.

Douno felt like Kitagawa was not a bad man at heart if it pleased him to receive words of gratitude. Even if Kitagawa had been guilty of killing someone, Douno felt like he would be able to start over if he repented his past crimes. He wanted Kitagawa to stop thinking of human feelings in a mechanical way, and realize that they were in fact warm and tender things.

On lunch break the next day, once they had finished putting away their dishes, Douno stopped rifling through prison's books and sat down beside Kitagawa.

"Is that interesting?"

"Not really," replied Kitagawa dully, as he stared absently at the TV.

"Let's have a chat."

Kitagawa tilted his head.

"Remember what you said yesterday, how you wanted me to say 'thank you'? The thing is, I don't want to say 'thank you' automatically like a machine. I want to be friends with you."

"No," Kitagawa said without even a pause.

"W-Why not?" Douno stammered.

"Friends are no good."

"But if we're friends, we don't have to have such a benefit-oriented kind of relationship. That way, we can develop a proper kind of connection."

"Like what kind?"

Douno hesitated.

"Maybe I would be able to help you if you ever got into trouble."

Kitagawa's shoulders trembled as he laughed silently.

"How can *you* help *me*? You don't know anything. You don't have anything. You're weak. You even had to ask someone like *me* to help you."

Perhaps it was true, but Douno did not want to be told to his face.

"You're always saying weird things," Kitagawa continued. "Is that what 'normal' is?" He shrugged his shoulders. "Normal is weird, isn't it?"

When they were eating dinner, Kitagawa tossed the last half of his tangerine—their dessert—onto Douno's plate. He was thorough enough to transfer Douno's peels over to his own plate to disguise that he had given his tangerine away.

If their cellmates knew that Kitagawa was sharing his food with Douno, they did not say anything. Some inmates tipped off prison guards secretly about their fellow inmates, so in that sense, Douno felt lucky to have cellmates who did not snitch.

Once their meal was over, they cleared off the table and spent their time until rest period reading or chatting. Douno, while occupied with a book, could feel Kitagawa's eyes blatantly fixed on him. He knew that the man was waiting for a 'thank you' in return for the tangerine, but he did not want to say it.

When Kakizaki began to talk about how he had cheap access to drugs, Kumon pounced on it and listened intently. Shiba responded with an occasional affirmation. Kitagawa was facing Kakizaki's direction, yet he had the same vacant eyes as when he watched TV.

He looked uninterested in drugs. Was he pretending to listen to the conversation in order to maintain good rapport? Douno had no idea about the man's intent. He looked up from the magazine he had been reading.

"Kitagawa."

The man turned around languidly.

"Want to read a book together?"

Kitagawa glanced briefly at Kakizaki, but in the end he leaned over to peer into Douno's magazine. Though Douno had made the offer to read together, there was nothing about this particular book that he had wanted Kitagawa to read. He had just felt somewhat uncomfortable letting Kitagawa hear the rest of the men talking about drugs.

Douno pointed offhandedly at a photo on the page. It was blazed with the headline "Hot Springs Feature" and went on to introduce the nation's top twenty best hot spring resorts.

"Wouldn't you like to go to a hot spring?" Douno said. "With the baths in this place, you have barely any time to soak and relax. An outdoor hot spring would be nice. You could enjoy the scenery while you bathe."

"Mm-hmm," Kitagawa grunted. "But isn't a hot spring just a giant bath? Why would you need to go so far away? You could just go to a public bath."

Kitagawa's lack of imagination made Douno hesitate in his next words.

"Yeah, but... I think it's nice to be able to go far away—well, it can be close by, too—and just go through the whole process of a trip, taking time and effort to plan and do things."

"I don't understand."

Douno could not ask a man to understand what he was not capable of understanding. He decided to change the topic, and flipped the page. It was an interview article with a bestselling author. His eyes were instantly glued to the old house in the background of the author's photo. It was a commonplace house, in the type of housing complex that had popped up abundantly in times of economic growth. But the house was also almost identical to the house he had grown up in.

"You know him?"

Douno smiled wryly. "I wasn't looking at him. I was looking at the house."

"The house?"

"It looks a lot like mine."

"Mm-hmm," Kitagawa said as he peered at the photo. It was an old, small house, but nevertheless a house he had lived in with his family. When he thought of how it could belong to someone else by the time he was released, and how his parents' decision was forced upon them all because of him, he felt as if a hand were clenching around his heart.

"What's it like inside?"

"Inside?"

"What's it like inside your house?"

"Well, normal."

"What's normal like?"

It was difficult to explain in words, so Douno got his notebook out. He had made a calendar on the front page, so he tore out a page from the back instead. There, he drew up a simple floor plan of his house.

Kitagawa, who had previously seemed uninterested in most things, showed a strong intrigue to Douno's floor plan.

"What's this?"

"That's the entrance. Once you go in, you'll see the hallway, and a set of stairs on the right side. My sister's room and my room are on the second floor. We have three rooms downstairs: the living room, my parents' bedroom, and the guest room."

Kitagawa then asked for the tinier details, like where the windows were located, and how spacious the bathroom was. Douno repeatedly erased and corrected his floor plan until he was left with a perfect blueprint of the Douno family home.

"So, don't you have any trees in the yard? How about a dog?" Kitagawa continued to ask. Douno ended up even filling in the sketch with the crape-myrtle tree in his yard and the flowerbed that his mother had constructed as a hobby.

Kitagawa gazed intently at the floor plan drawn in Douno's notebook. He held it at arm's length, then placed it on the table. Placing his fingertip on the sheet, he went through the front gates, entered the house, and made his way to the living room. There, he traced his finger round and round.

"What are you doing?" Douno asked.

"Running around because it looks really big," Kitagawa said, in a way a fanciful child would.

"What was your house like?" Douno was piqued with interest, but Kitagawa just tilted his head a little.

"Small, I guess."

"Draw it out for me." Douno handed him the pencil. Kitagawa drew a small square on the page.

"This is it?"

"Yeah."

"It looks pretty cramped."

"About two *tatami* mats, I think."

"But there's no entrance, toilet, or bathroom."

"This is the entrance. I didn't have a toilet or bathroom."

"What?" Douno replied in disbelief.

"I had a potty instead of a toilet. I had a blanket, too. It was hot and smelly in the summer, and cold in the winter."

"Were you living alone?"

"I had a mother, but I barely saw her. She threw my food in through the window, but some days she would forget and I wouldn't have anything to eat."

Douno swallowed hard.

"And... when was this?"

"I dunno. I was still a kid. I don't remember anymore." Kitagawa scribbled out the square box-like room with his pencil. "I went to my aunt's place afterwards, but at first I couldn't talk because I'd forgotten how. It was my first time in a long time using my voice."

Kitagawa began to draw another floor plan on the next page.

"This is my aunt's place." The drawing had only an entrance, washroom, and a room in the back.

"Didn't your aunt's house have a kitchen or bathroom?"

"It did, but I don't remember anymore. I was always in the room in the back. I think I was there for less than half a year. One day—I don't remember when it was—my aunt stopped bringing me food. I got hungry so I stepped out of my room, and the whole house was empty except for me. After that, I went to an orphanage."

It was a past that would grieve any listener; yet Kitagawa recited it in a calm and regular manner.

"After finishing middle school, I started working. Noodle factories, printing factories. I liked working at construction sites, though. That was fun."

He drew another picture on the page.

"I used to work for a place called the Nishimoto Group, and I was staying at their dorm before I got into jail."

The dormitory was rectangular and long in shape.

"Everyone just put their stuff everywhere, and slept wherever they wanted. It was smelly and dirty. Some people had sticky fingers, so if you weren't careful you could get your money stolen. I always wore a belly-warmer and hid my money there."

Kitagawa suddenly looked up. "Do you enjoy listening to this kind of stuff?"

"It's not really about enjoying, it's just..."

"Draw me the building you used to work at."

"I don't think you'd find it very interesting. I worked at city hall."

"Mm-hmm," Kitagawa said through his nose. He tilted his head slightly, then glanced up at Douno from under his eyebrows. "So what do people go to city hall for?"

Nights were long in the group cell. Lights-out was at 21:00. When he was unable to sleep, Douno was instead forced to think. When an idea entered his mind, it possessed him entirely and bothered him constantly.

He thought of the police's appallingly biased investigation; the woman who had called him a molester; Mitsuhashi, who had tricked him; his parents, who had been forced into moving out. All of these thoughts were wreathed in hatred and regret, and made Douno's spirits sink.

One cold, sleepless night, Douno turned his thoughts away from himself and thought of the prison system. Disciplined group activity. Strict rules. He had half-resigned himself to them since he figured he had no choice but to comply—but what meaning did those rules hold?

They were forced into labour, burdened with restrictions. But that was it. There were probably many people who wanted avoid being caught so they would not be brought here; but how many people truly acknowledged and regretted the crime they had committed? He did not mean to say that this place was absolutely lacking in remorseful, constructive-minded people. That was not what he was trying to say, but....

During exercise or break, sometimes the conversation turned to their criminal histories. Many more considered themselves merely unlucky for being caught, rather than feeling remorseful. Thieves even discussed doing future stints together after their release, destroying the purpose of prison altogether.

Douno wished prisons would look at and treat a little more of inmates' psychological aspects. After all, there were criminals here whose psychologies were so immature that they were unable to recognize their deeds as crimes.

His feet were cold. Douno gave a small sneeze. Since coming to prison, he felt a renewed sense towards the true frigidity of winter.

"You cold?" A voice spoke from beside him. He could tell Kitagawa was looking his way.

"My feet are, a little bit."

Kitagawa never spoke of his criminal history. Douno had heard through other people that he was guilty of murder, but he did not know of the events that led up to it. It was dubious whether it was even a good idea to ask.

"Try sticking your feet in my futon."

"What?"

"Your foot. Gimme your foot."

Douno did as he was told and quietly slid his right foot into the futon next to his. A pair of hands inside the futon grabbed his ankle and pushed his foot up against something warm.

When he realized that Kitagawa was warming his cold foot with his own belly, Douno felt guilty. He reassured Kitagawa that it wasn't necessary, but the man did not let go of his foot. Surely Kitagawa was cold himself—but he was enduring it for Douno's sake, which pained Douno's heart.

He knew these acts were being done out of a prospect for a reward, but he could not simply dismiss it as just that. Indeed, Kitagawa's way of thinking was strange, but he was still a kind man. Why had someone as kind as him perpetrated a murder?

Perhaps Kitagawa had not thought deeply about it; perhaps it had been an impulsive act. Douno found it hard to believe that it could be premeditated.

"Your left foot next."

Douno had pulled his right foot back into his futon, and with a polite "No, I'm fine", he refused to stick his left foot out. A hand came reaching into his futon this time, grabbing his left ankle firmly and pulling it over to the other man's futon.

He could feel the warmth slowly spreading in his foot. Douno laughed a little, in spite of himself, at the strange sense of happiness that it brought him.

Douno's desire to do something was almost a natural, logical turn of thought. Kitagawa was always doing things for him, admittedly even things which Douno did not necessarily need him to do. Even so, it was an unshakable fact that Kitagawa was doing these things for Douno's sake.

Kitagawa was in his ninth year in prison, while Douno had been here for a mere four months. In terms of advice, there was nothing he could give. But when he heard that Kitagawa was being released in just over a year, Douno wondered if he could give the man something that was not done in prison: an education in sensitivity and morals.

Douno felt like Kitagawa's misdeed was somehow related to his unhappy childhood history. Douno believed Kitagawa's lack of understanding concerning certain things stemmed directly from his lack of interaction with others and with society. If Douno could teach Kitagawa what he did not know, and enable him to recognize the right from the wrong, he felt Kitagawa could get on with life just fine after getting out of prison. It was only the best for him. Douno felt he could not let Kitagawa while his days away in what was essentially a criminal prep school.

The prison management, from its own point of view, would perhaps protest that interfering with the individual emotions of its inmates was beyond its responsibility. However, it remained a fact that autonomous people were those who possessed strong wills; those who resorted to crime were weaker ones—they were people who were unsure of what to do, or how.

Douno began making a conscious effort to read books with Kitagawa. Since the man had shown interest in the floor plan of his house, Douno mainly chose books related to buildings. The types of books available were limited; they were often stuck with titles such as *A Collection of One Hundred Temples* or *Art Galleries of the World*, but Kitagawa expressed a little more interest than he did towards the TV as he leaned over to peer at the book in Douno's hands.

Perhaps it was due to Douno's influence, or a spark of interest ignited within him: Kitagawa, a man previously never seen reading, began to borrow books on his own. He began to sketch the buildings from them into his notebook.

In the evenings, Kitagawa seemed impatient for dinner to end. Once it was finished, he would immediately open his notebook and begin drawing. Once he was done, he showed Douno the completed sketches. At first, they were like the clumsy scribbles of a young child. "That's a nice picture," Douno would say, more out of politeness than out of real admiration. Recently, however, Kitagawa's drawing had improved at an astonishing pace, and his skill was enough to leave one awestruck.

"That's drawn really well," Douno would say. Kitagawa's lips would turn up a little. Then, he would draw some more. He drew with such fervent concentration that he took no notice his cellmates speaking to him. He hunched over his sketches intently as if possessed by a demon of illustration.

In the end of January, Kitagawa drew the Sagrada Família over two pages of his notebook, opened in a spread and turned sideways. It was a stunning piece, and even cellmates who had been rather uninterested in Kitagawa's drawing pursuits now leaned in to have a look.

"It's amazing," Douno said enthusiastically. "I didn't know you had such a talent for drawing." Kitagawa beamed proudly at his compliment.

"It was a hell of a lot of work, though." He peered into Douno's face from below. "Praise me more. Say more things like "that's amazing" or "that's well done". This took me three whole days to draw. Give me three days' worth of praise."

Indeed, Kitagawa's drawing was very impressive; but Douno was slightly bothered by his persistent requests to be praised.

"But it's not like you drew this just to show me, right? I mean, I agree that your drawing is amazing, but—"

"I *did* draw it to show you," Kitagawa said impatiently, as if exasperated that Douno had just realized the fact. "It feels good when you tell me it's amazing, or that I'm talented. Why else would I draw something that's such a pain in the ass?"

"That's not right," Douno said. "Drawing is what you do for yourself. It's not for me. You draw for your *own* sake."

Kitagawa cocked his head.

"What're you saying?"

"I'm saying that you should draw for yourself—"

"I don't know what you're talking about. Society is all about transactions, isn't it? If I want something, I have to give something in exchange. I want to be praised, so I draw. How's that wrong?"

"I just wanted to... to give you a sense of initiative..."

"What's 'initiative'?"

Douno was at a loss for an answer. Kitagawa slammed his notebook shut irritably. That day, when normally he would have drawn with fervour, Kitagawa did not draw at all. The next day during lunch break, Kitagawa got out of his seat to talk to Kakizaki, when before he would have been beside Douno, reading a book with him. The thought made Douno feel a little lonely.

Evening came, along with rest period before lights-out. Kitagawa still had not talked to Douno. Of course, he had not drawn anything, either. Kitagawa was angry—but Douno, for the life of himself, could not understand what he was angry about. Four days after they stopped talking, Douno was called out by the factory guard in the morning. It was an interview. His father had come to see him.

"You lost weight," said his father, although he looked like he had lost even more. Douno had no words to say. The grey was more prominent in his father's hair, and he looked as if he had shrunk a size. His face was perpetually turned downwards, and he had a lost look about him, as if he was uncertain of what to say to his son.

"I'm sure you've heard from your mother and Tomoko. We've sold the house. It's been about a month since our move now, but living in the country isn't so bad. Everyone's laid-back."

The more his father emphasized the good points of the country, the more it discomfited Douno, making him feel as if his father was just putting on a brave face.

"And about the man from the police department—the guy hasn't been found yet."

"I'm sorry. It's all my—"

His father shook his head.

"It's not your fault. Your mother and I weren't cautious enough. You don't need to worry."

Their conversation was intermittent, but his father remained sitting across from him for the entire fifteen-minute allowance before going home. Douno returned to the factory and sat down in front of his sewing machine again. Suddenly, he felt like crying. His parents and sister had done nothing wrong. It was painful to be reminded that their suffering stemmed from his own mistake.

Noon came before he could get very far in his work. Kitagawa sat down beside him and finished his meal in seconds, and stood promptly as the signal to finish eating was given. Until then, Douno had not been thinking of anything in particular; he had only felt helplessly lonely, and could describe it in no other word than loneliness. Before he knew it, he had grabbed the hem of Kitagawa's factory jacket.

Kitagawa's steely, cruel-looking eyes glanced downwards at Douno.

"Would you... would you be able to stay with me a while?"

Kitagawa looked over at Kakizaki once, but lowered himself back into his chair. With Kitagawa beside him, Douno let his thoughts rove over a great many things. They were not much different from what he had been thinking of before, but he felt a little more at ease to know that he was not alone. Beside him was someone who would give him help. If something should happen to him, he trusted that this man would be there somehow. This belief created an escape path for his feelings.

A little before lunch break ended, Douno thanked Kitagawa.

"I haven't done anything," the man beside him said bluntly.

"You stayed beside me."

"I said I didn't do anything."

"Even if you didn't do anything, you made me feel better by being beside me. That's why I said 'thank you'."

Creases appeared between Kitagawa's eyebrows.

"I don't understand."

"That's fine if you don't."

Kitagawa remained sitting in his chair, and began to shake his leg in an irritated manner. The expression on his face remained sullen as he questioned Douno.

"So, why?"

Douno wondered what he could say to make Kitagawa understand how he felt.

"Because I was glad to have you beside me."

"I..." Kitagawa began, then fell silent.

"This isn't a transaction," Douno said. "It's not about getting rewards or something in return. It's about how I feel."

The man beside him was silent at Douno's words.

"But I haven't done anything."

"You don't have to do anything."

Kitagawa stood up from his seat and left to go to Kakizaki. Douno had done his best to communicate his feelings truly and honestly, and he felt forlorn that he had not been understood.

There was exercise period the next day. After a light warm-up, Douno took a seat by the fence and absently watched the softball game. At first he had been amazed at how enthusiastically everyone played the game, but later when he found out that people bet on it, Douno was simultaneously exasperated and strangely convinced.

The wind was chilly, but the sun's rays were warm. As Douno sat with his arms around his knees, he heard the birds chirping above. He was suddenly reminded of the school hike he went on as a child. He smiled wryly at the stark difference between the forest of his childhood and the prison grounds.

A shadow fell over his feet. He looked up to see Kitagawa standing in front of him. His brow was furrowed, and he had a difficult expression on his face.

"What is it?"

Kitagawa averted his eyes. He was clearly avoiding eye contact, yet showed no signs of moving away. He wavered uncertainly in front of Douno, then looked at him head on.

"You give me the creeps."

A sharp pain stabbed Douno's heart at the direct blow. He had no idea what part of him had made Kitagawa think him "creepy", but if it bothered him, Douno wished he would have just ignored him and not said anything.

"So?" he answered, with some spite. Suddenly, Kitagawa began to stamp his feet restlessly on the spot.

"So... so, I'm just saying..."

"If you think I'm creepy, you should just stay away from me."

He could see Kitagawa chewing his lip. The man was mumbling something, but he could not catch the words.

"...I said you're creepy and that's what you are." Douno could finally catch that much. "You say things I can't understand, no matter how much I think about it. It keeps bothering me, and it creeps me out."

Douno blinked.

"What is it with you?" Kitagawa demanded. "What is this weird feeling?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Kitagawa clenched his fists.

"I'm saying I don't like it!" he said heatedly.

"Okay, I understand you don't like it, but *what* kind of feeling is it?"

Douno thought the man would leave, but contrary to his expectations, Kitagawa sat down about twenty centimetres away from him. He glanced over at Douno from time to time, as if to assess him.

"I feel really small and shrivelled up inside. Why does that happen?"

Douno had a hard time understanding Kitagawa's abstract answer.

"Are you saying you feel lonely?"

"I dunno." Kitagawa stared at the ground and uprooted a handful of grass at his feet. "Pat my head," he mumbled, without looking up. Douno had no idea what the man was thinking, but did as he was told anyway and patted Douno on the head. Despite having asked for it, Kitagawa remained stiff, hugging his knees for the whole time he was being touched.

"I won't do anything for you, you know." A pair of glowering eyes looked up at Douno. "I won't share any of my good dinner with you. I won't give you medicine if you catch a fever."

"I'm not expecting anything in return."

"I *said* I won't give you anything! Stop listening to what I say!"

Douno gently drew his hand away from the trembling head.

"Can't you have a relationship without transactions or rewards?"

A pair of teary eyes looked up at Douno.

"I don't know what that is."

"Neither person has to profit. People can get along as long as the feelings are there."

"That's weird."

"I think that's how it normally is."

Kitagawa's face remained cast down as he sat still. Then, once more, he murmured, "Pat me on the head." When he did, Kitagawa hugged his knees harder and curled up into a tighter ball.

"What am I supposed to do for you?"

"You don't have to do anything."

Kitagawa looked at him.

"You really don't have to do anything," Douno reassured him gently.

Kitagawa's eyes were still fixed on the ground. "Mm-hmm," he murmured. Someone had swung a large hit and sent the softball flying. The ball made an arc as it glided through the air, and disappeared in the glare of the sun. Kitagawa looked up to follow the ball with his eyes.

He was supposed to be a full-grown adult, yet he had a childishness about him. When their eyes met, Kitagawa hastily looked down again. Douno was almost sure that it was out of

sheepishness this time.

There were many ways you could feel another's affection: in his facial expressions, words, attitude, and the way he favoured you over everyone else. But if all of them were direct to you at once? This was precisely Douno's current predicament.

Kitagawa became inseparable from Douno, and his attachment was enough to raise the eyebrows of those around him. He never left Douno's side for a moment, through lunch break, and after dinner until lights-out. They had been close enough before because they sat beside each other; now, Kitagawa was practically nestled up to him.

"What're you reading?" he would peek over and ask, whenever Douno was reading a book. At first Kitagawa would be content to read with him, but when he grew bored, he would pester Douno with suggestions to play *go* or *shogi* instead. Douno was unskilled at both, but since Kitagawa insisted, he played one or two games. When he tried to wrap up, Kitagawa would stubbornly protest that he wanted to keep playing. When Douno refused, he pouted and sulked, but still did not leave Douno's side.

"Let's hold hands," he said one night, moments after lights-out.

"Holds hands?"

"Friends hold hands, right?"

We're not children, Douno thought in exasperation, but since he had no especial reason to refuse, he held the man's hand. Kitagawa clasped and re-clasped Douno's hand over and over. It bothered him a little, but not for long; before he knew it, he fell fast asleep. When he woke in the morning, they were still holding hands. Not only that, their clasped hands had slid out of their futons into plain view. Douno felt a jab of fear as he realized they could have been caught by the guard and given a warning.

Kitagawa woke up when Douno moved his hand. He blinked sleepily, then grinned at him. He chuckled softly as he hid his face behind the futon, then peeped out again.

"What are you doing?"

Kitagawa ducked underneath his futon without answering. A guard passed them in the hallway, but did not warn Kitagawa for sleeping with the futon over his head. The guard was apparently kinder and more lenient than most.

Kitagawa was in high spirits for the rest of the day. Not a shadow of distant aloofness was to be found on his face; he talked animatedly and laughed often. After their meal, Kitagawa sniffed at Douno's clothes as a dog would do. Douno wondered if he still smelled after his bath.

"Do I smell?" he asked.

Kitagawa shook his head. "You smell good."

"Is it the soap, maybe?"

"Not that."

Kitagawa pressed his nose against Douno's neck to breathe in his scent, then stuck out his tongue and licked Douno's neck. Douno flinched. Then, for some reason, Kitagawa began to playfully bite Douno's head.

"Wh—What're you doing?" Douno stammered, trying to extract himself from the man's grasp, but Kitagawa latched onto him from behind and prevented his escape. Kumon guffawed as he watched them.

"What, Kitagawa, planning on becoming a cannibal?"

"Of course not. I would never eat him," Kitagawa replied in all seriousness. "Then Douno would disappear."

"There you have the truth of it," Shiba said solemnly.

Kakizaki cackled before turning to Kumon. "Uh, what does he mean by 'the truth of it'?" he asked stupidly. Kumon turned up the corners of his mouth in a sly grin.

"It's when a man and a woman fuck each other and have babies," he said bluntly, before emitting a short vulgar laugh.

Kitagawa stopped chewing on Douno's head. Still holding him from behind, he began to rock back and forth.

"S—Stop fooling around, or we'll get in trouble by the guard," Douno protested, but Kitagawa refused to listen. After some moments, the voice behind him spoke.

"I'm hard."

Douno froze.

"That's what you get for thrusting," Kumon told him. "Now your dick is in the mood. Go take five in the toilet."

Kitagawa fetched a tissue from his shelf before entering the washroom. Douno knew it was only a natural biological reaction; more than once, he had also done it himself in his futon. But, Douno thought indignantly, did the man *have* to choose to get an erection behind him, out of all places?

Kakizaki sidled up beside him while Kitagawa was in the toilet. They were still not allowed to leave their designated places after dinner until rest period, but Kakizaki appeared not to regard that rule.

"So, Mr. Douno, are you and bro Kitagawa, like, together?" he whispered.

"Together, as in—?"

"You know, do you guys have butt sex?"

"What?"

Shiba, in an attempt to let it get no further, interfered by thumping a hand on Kakizaki's head.

"Do you think they could, in a group cell?" he said with some exasperation. "Kitagawa's just horsing around with Douno, that's all."

"Yeah, but, I was just thinking if that's true, I'd like to join in, too."

Kumon made a disgusted sound. "Go stick a pair of chopsticks up your ass if it's so damn lonely," he spat.

Kakizaki wrinkled his nose in an offended way.

"I only play the top, Mr. Kumon. You're only able to make fun of homos because you don't know what butt sex can be like. It's really tight down there, you know. It's *awesome*."

Shiba closed his book. "No matter how tight it is, I don't think I could stand to see the balls hanging there," he commented.

"Y-Yeah, but—"

"Enough about asses already!" Kumon snapped angrily, his brow creasing in discontent. "If you like ass so much, you can go into solitary and jack off all you want. I know, why don't I let the guard know about it? It's the least I could do," he said nastily.

Kakizaki shook his head. "Noooo, not solitary," he whined, "it gets lonely in there."

They were still talking when Kitagawa came out of the toilets. He stood behind Kakizaki with an expression of displeasure on his face.

"That's my spot," he growled menacingly. Kakizaki hastened back to his place. Having settled back into his rightful spot, Kitagawa turned to Douno. When their eyes met, the man flashed him a grin.

During the daytime, some factory workers were forced to leave by the guard. About a week

ago, their factory guard had changed from a middle-aged senior officer to a young man in his late twenties. Officers were switched around often, but the young officer this time was needlessly intimidating and doled out punishment slips at the smallest disturbances. As a result, his reputation among the inmates was less than favourable.

That day, two inmates had gotten into an argument during work. The disagreement was to do with their jobs, but the officer had pressed the emergency alarm without even seeking an explanation. The two inmates were forcibly removed from the factory.

The officer made a show of looking disgusted at their lowly conduct, then dismissed the rest of the inmates with a warning that they were to work quietly if they didn't want to be met with the same punishment. Then, he yanked out an unruly nose hair that was protruding from his nostril.

Douno was furious. Who did this man think he was? *Just because you're an officer, it doesn't mean you're above everything*, he thought angrily. A surge of wrath boiled inside him, which made him almost stand up to protest. But the word "punishment" crossed his mind, and he was unable to get out of his seat. This made him feel even more cowardly and depressed his spirits further.

There was an exercise period that day as well. Outside in the dead of winter, under a cloudy sky and the weak rays of the sun, one had to keep moving constantly or risk freezing one's fingertips off. Douno took a leisurely walk around the circumference of the grounds, and Kitagawa accompanied closely beside him. When Douno stopped, he stopped; when Douno sat down, so did he. Kitagawa never left his side, whether it was during exercise or mealtimes. Rumours among the inmates at the factory that they were "together" had by now also reached Douno's ears.

It was not pleasant to be thought of as a homosexual by those around him, and Douno was irritated every time he was teased about it. But he never thought of pushing Kitagawa away. He was hesitant to spite the man who looked at him with a childish, even a dog-like affection. Douno was also unable to deny the pity he felt towards Kitagawa's unfortunate upbringing.

"That guard gets to me," Douno said forcefully. "Giving them a reprimand for something as small as that. He doesn't understand how much impact a single punishment can have on us inmates."

Douno took advantage of their seclusion to vent his frustrations to Kitagawa. One had to choose his listeners carefully here, even when airing complaints. If you were overheard making unfavourable remarks by an inmate who was after brownie points, the inmate would snitch to the guard, who would then pick you out as a target for relentless bullying. Douno had heard before of a man who had racked up penalty slips for every little thing he did wrong. He was ultimately sent into solitary, and began to suffer from depression because of persistent bullying. There was another inmate who, upon being released on parole, promptly murdered the guard in charge and was thrown back in prison again. Douno could now understand how the man must have felt.

"Hey, can I lie down on your lap?"

The heat of his anger had risen to his head that for a moment, Douno could not comprehend what was said to him.

"Use your lap as a pillow, I mean."

Granted, back in their group cell, their seats were designated and they were not free to lie down during free time. *But that doesn't mean you have to do this where everyone can see*, Douno thought briefly.

Besides, he had been in the middle of speaking. He was not expecting an answer since he was simply complaining, but he wished Kitagawa would at least attempt to show him that he was listening.

"Yeah, but you know..." Douno began.

"Give me your lap."

Kitagawa refused to abandon his persistent attachment to Douno's lap. In the end, Douno lost the war of wills and surrendered. *Here I go, feeding rumours again*, he thought. Kitagawa laid his head down on Douno's lap with his face turned towards Douno's torso.

Douno was concerned that the guard would give them a warning, but the guard was currently looking away from them, busy watching the softball game.

Kitagawa's head, which had so far been lying still in Douno's lap, shifted over. Kitagawa had pressed his nose into Douno's crotch and begun to sniff at something. Douno felt squirmish.

"H-Hey, stop that."

"It smells like you."

"Knock it off." Douno grabbed the man's head with both hands and pushed it away from his crotch. Kitagawa clicked his tongue irritably and gave up trying to press his face between Douno's legs, but steadfastly refused to move off his lap.

In the end, Kitagawa had resorted to clinging to Douno's legs to avoid being pushed off. Douno chuckled at the man's stubbornness.

"What was your first name again?" he asked nonchalantly.

There was a short pause.

"Kei," Kitagawa answered.

"How do you write it?"

"Two earths on top of each other.⁴ —What about your name?"

"Takafumi."

"How do you write it?"

"'Mountain' with 'religion' underneath for 'taka', and 'script' for 'fumi'."⁵

"Mm-hmm."

"Kei is a cute name," Douno said warmly. Kitagawa glanced up at him.

"It's like it belongs to someone else."

"Why would you say that?"

"I've never been called by it before."

Douno was wracked with pity to imagine what kind of environment the man had grown up in for him never to be called by his name.

"What a waste," he said softly.

Kitagawa grinned. "It's almost like you gave me that name."

"Shall I call you Kei from now on, then?"

Kitagawa nodded enthusiastically in his lap. "Can I call you Takafumi?"

"Sure."

"Takafumi, Takafumi," Kitagawa repeated over and over, for no reason. It was endearing to watch, and Douno reached out to gently stroke the man's shaven head. Kitagawa half-closed his eyes blissfully like a cat. The thought crossed Douno's mind again: how could a man with such a young boy's heart kill another person? The longer they spent their days together, the more Douno could tell that Kitagawa was calm by nature, and was not a hot-tempered person. He definitely did not seem the type to murder a person out of careful calculation, or even in the an act of passion.

Perhaps it was bad to ask; but Douno's desire to know burgeoned, and he surrendered to his curiosity and posed the question vaguely.

4 "Kei" is written 圭 in Chinese characters. The word for soil, dirt, or earth is 土.

5 Douno describes "taka" (崇) as a combination of mountain (山) and religion (宗); "fumi" (文) can mean epistle, sentence, script, or writing.

"How did you get into jail?"

Kitagawa tilted his head questioningly. "You don't know?"

"I've heard rumours, but..."

So you do know. End of story, Kitagawa seemed to say as he closed his eyes.

"I've heard," Douno insisted, "but I can't... well, I just can't believe that you would kill someone."

Kitagawa opened his eyes a crack. Douno could feel the man looking at him steadily. Maybe he had stepped into touchy territory—Douno hastily tacked some words to the end of his sentence.

"If you don't want to talk about it, that's fine. I shouldn't have tried to force it out of you. I'm sorry." Douno took a breath and gave a short sigh. Their conversation was over—he was convinced that it was.

"My mom came to me on a rainy day," Kitagawa murmured suddenly. "She came to my dorm at the construction site. I hadn't seen her in ten years. I didn't know who the middle-aged woman in front of me was until she told me she was my mother. She said we should catch up over a meal, so we went out. She treated me to a meatloaf set at the diner. After that, she asked me to lend her money because she said she was in a rough spot, so I did."

Kitagawa yawned.

"Then she came over and over again to borrow money from me. She came one day in the winter, when it was raining, and when I told her I had no more money, she took my hand and told me to come with her. I followed her into a warehouse, in the back, where some guy was lying on the floor. She gave me a knife wrapped in a handkerchief and said, 'If you don't kill this man, I'll be killed. So kill him.' So I stabbed him, like she said."

You know, Kitagawa murmured as he looked up at Douno.

"You know people don't say anything when they die? They don't even scream. I didn't know how much I had to stab him for him to die, or how I could tell if he was dead."

Douno pressed his right hand to his forehead. "And you told this to the police, didn't you?"

"Yeah, I told them that I killed him."

"No, I mean that your mother told you to kill him."

"I didn't. My mom told me to say that *I* did it, so I did."

A flurry of incredulity came and went in Douno's heart.

"Why didn't you tell the truth?" he demanded. "You say you 'killed him', but how do you know he wasn't already dead? How do you know you weren't just used as a scapegoat?"

"I dunno," Kitagawa answered. Douno was seized by anger.

"Why didn't you think of proving your innocence? If he was really already dead, you would have only damaged a lifeless body. You might've been charged, but you wouldn't have had to stay in prison for so many years!"

"I don't care whether he was dead or not," said Kitagawa flatly. "I'd never even met him before. Besides, you get more cred in prison if you're serving for murder, and no one messes with you."

Douno was stunned. He could not understand Kitagawa's mind. No matter if his own mother had begged him; how could he kill another man? How could he think it was alright? Where was this man's moral uprightness?

"Why do you look like that?" Kitagawa knitted his brow. "You wanted to hear it, Takafumi. You asked me why I killed him."

"Yeah, but..."

"I told you because it was you. I didn't tell the officer, the lawyer, or any other inmates. My

mom told me not to tell anyone, you know."

Douno did not know how to answer him.

"If you haven't told anyone until now, why did you tell me?"

"Because you wanted to know," Kitagawa repeated, then pouted. "Because I like you more than my mom. What's wrong with favouring the one that I think is better?"

"Favour? What's that supposed to mean?"

Kitagawa lapsed into a bewildered silence.

"Favouring is favouring, what else?" he said finally.

Douno tried to force Kitagawa's head off his lap, but the man clung to him in protest. No matter what Douno did, he was unable to pry Kitagawa off. If he made a fuss, he felt like the guard would come running, so Douno gave up trying to extricate himself from Kitagawa's hold.

"I want to be with you more than my mom, Takafumi. Even if we're together, even if I touch you, I feel warm."

Douno wondered if this man had worshipped his mother—even the kind of mother who transferred her crimes to her own son—and his heart ached at how barren Kitagawa's history of human relationships must have been.

"Once you get out of here, get a proper job, and become able to cherish someone, you'll find someone a lot better than me."

"I'll be an old geezer by the time I get around to that."

Douno tilted his head in lieu of a question.

"I'm turning thirty next year. You were the first person I met like this, Takafumi. So if I go from there, the next person'll come in twenty-nine years, right? I'll be close to sixty. A geezer. I think I'd rather hold on to you."

Despite Douno having told him earlier not to, Kitagawa pressed his face into his crotch.

"I wanna have sex," he muttered.

Douno felt his heart jump.

"All this time, I've never looked at a guy's ass and wanted to do him. But I want to with you, Takafumi. Have I turned into a homo?" Kitagawa said thoughtfully. "I wonder if people usually turn homo so quickly."

"A-Are you sure you're not misunderstanding?" Douno stammered.

"I am *not*," Kitagawa insisted. "Even now, I want to undo your fly, drag your dick out and try licking it. I feel like your jizz would smell nice too, Takafumi."

"Stop it, Kitagawa!" Douno said sharply.

"Aren't you gonna call me Kei? Come on, call me Kei. You named me."

Douno trembled violently. Something akin to both rage and humiliation, yet not quite either of them, coursed through his body.

"Don't be mad."

"Wh—How could I not be?" he snapped.

"Why're you mad? I only said the truth." Kitagawa finally lifted his head. His absence left a cold spot on Douno's lap.

"You know, I thought about it," Kitagawa said. "I thought and I thought, and I really do want to have sex with you. I thought about why it was sex, and I realized something."

Douno looked up.

"I'm in love with you, Takafumi. That's why I want to have sex with you."

"You're just slapping an excuse onto your lust," Douno spat.

"Married couples have sex because they love each other, right? It's the same thing. I love you, Takafumi, and that's why I wanna have sex with you."

"No!" Douno snarled, then looked hard at the ground.

"Why're you saying I'm wrong? I'm saying I love you," the voice whispered at his ear. Douno did not know how to answer him.

If this was outside of the fence—Douno thought. Suppose his male friend had confessed to him. If Douno didn't feel the same way, he would put it into words and decline frankly. Then, he would keep a physical distance and spend some time away from him. Douno's rationale was that this would allow the other person to calm his feelings.

Douno was frank with Kitagawa. "I like you as a friend, but I don't have any romantic feelings for you whatsoever. So I don't want to have sex with you," he stated firmly.

"Then, I'll make you like me so much that you *do* want to have sex with me," Kitagawa had said. He could keep a distance, Douno thought, but in their group cell and at mealtimes, their seats were beside each other. There was no way to keep distance, even if he wanted to.

Kitagawa's level of physical contact grew more and more intimate. One night, Douno woke to a strange sensation on his lips. When he realized that he was being kissed, and that the kisser was Kitagawa, Douno barely managed not to yell, and kicked away the body on top of him instead. There was a large thud, and the night guard came running. Everyone pretended they were asleep, and claimed not to have heard anything. The guard insisted he had heard noise from this room.

"I didn't hear any sound, sir," Shiba said. "But if you did, then maybe it was one of the cells further up, or upstairs?" The guard gradually seemed to lose confidence at Shiba's suggestion, and relented. Once he left, Kumon turned to them.

"Do it quietly, for gods' sakes. Quietly!" he hissed. Douno knew what "it" referred to, and Kumon's words were unbearably humiliating.

The next morning, Douno waited for lunch break to scold Kitagawa. When he told Kitagawa that it was against general etiquette to do things like that without the other person's consent, Kitagawa asked why.

"While I was *sleeping*? It's cowardly!" Douno snapped in a small voice, in a corner of the bookshelves.

"It's better when you're sleeping, isn't it? I figured you'd be mad if you were awake."

"Damn right!"

"But when you're sleeping, you don't notice what I do. Since you have no idea that it's happening, in your head it would be same as it not happening at all."

"That's nonsense."

"I've kissed you five times already, but today was the only day you woke up."

Douno was shocked to know that this was not the first time. Kitagawa looked at him almost challengingly.

"Are you gonna be mad at me for those other five times, too?" he said.

"I've had enough of you," Douno said angrily.

"You can be mad all you want, but your seat is still beside mine."

Douno was sick of talking to him, but when he tried to leave, Kitagawa grabbed him by the right arm.

"Let go of me," Douno said shortly, trying to shake his arm free.

"But I love you," Kitagawa murmured at his ear. Douno's heart contracted.

"I love you," Kitagawa repeated. "I love you so much, I want to kiss you even when you're asleep." His eyes narrowed. He kept repeating "I love you", whispering right into Douno's ear, as

if he was fully aware of Douno's agitation. Douno was annoyed at Kitagawa for the decidedly un-childlike manipulation he was using to make Douno lose his composure.

"Don't throw words around like toys. You make me sick," he said scathingly.

"I really love you, Takafumi."

Douno stared at his feet. Even outside the fence, even as a joke, he had never been told "I love you" so many times in his life—not once.

Douno resigned himself to being kissed at night, and concluded that there was nothing he could do. If he said no, Kitagawa would not listen; on the other hand, if he resisted and made a commotion, he would only cause trouble for his fellow cellmates. If he felt Kitagawa kissing him, Douno made sure not to open his eyes. He pretended to be asleep, and waited patiently for the man's presence to leave him.

Perhaps because of his long stint in prison, Kitagawa was sensitive to the footsteps of the night guard. Sometimes in the middle of a kiss, Kitagawa would draw away suddenly. A dozen or so seconds later, the guard would come patrolling. The guard walked on the carpeted part of the hallway during rounds, and his footsteps were faint; they were not faint enough, however, to escape Kitagawa's uncanny hearing ability.

Kitagawa was also a master of concealment. The cold pills he had given to Douno were pills he had been collecting since summertime, by lying at every medical checkup that he was ill. Collecting medicine was against the rules, and was punishable if caught. But even during spot checks of their belongings in the group cell or in the factory, Kitagawa's pills were never found. When it came to hiding things, he was incredibly adept.

As the days wore on without a way to curb Kitagawa from persistently following him around, Douno gradually grew used to the man's uncomfortable level of closeness. Once Douno began taking it in stride, he found he could put up fairly well with Kitagawa's unnatural attachment and kisses.

Telling the man off did not work. Kitagawa often responded with a nonsensical argument. To avoid letting himself get angry, Douno figured it was best not to say anything in the first place. Kitagawa seemed to interpret Douno's silence as acceptance, and began to touch and kiss him as a matter of course.

Kumon joked at first about Kitagawa's fixation with Douno, but he eventually stopped saying anything. Shiba minded his own business.

One Sunday at the end of a frigid February, there was a gathering for second-class prisoners. Prisoners were classified into four different classes, and those in third class or higher were given the privilege of participating in a gathering on their day off of work, where they ate snacks, drank juice, and watched a movie.

Douno was only months into his sentence, and therefore remained a fourth-class inmate with no gathering to go to. Kitagawa was in second class. That day there was a gathering for second-class inmates, and Kitagawa left in the morning to watch a movie. For Douno, who usually spent the whole day being followed around by Kitagawa, even a short respite from his presence was a great load off his shoulders.

Douno was enjoying a book by himself for once when Kakizaki spoke up from his spot across.

"Mr. Douno," he drawled, "You've got really fair skin."

Douno sensed that he was implying something. "It must be because I don't get out much," he said casually.

"It's not just because you don't get out. You're fair to begin with," Kakizaki said. "It stands out in the showers."

Douno was disturbed to know where the man's eyes had been prying during their baths.

"Y'know what I've been thinkin' about, Mr. Douno? Is bro Kitagawa really your type?"

Douno hesitated at the bare question.

"He and I aren't like that," he replied.

"Uh, it's pretty obvious you guys are homo," Kakizaki said blandly. Douno had no argument to make. He had drawn a clear line within himself, but for everyone else, the fact that he and Kitagawa kissed at night and were intimate for no apparent reason drew the inevitable assumption that they were gay.

Kakizaki leaned over the desk.

"Just between you and me," he said, lowering his voice. "I heard bro Kitagawa's never done it with a girl *or* a guy."

Kumon had apparently heard him in spite of his hushed tone, and pounced on the subject.

"So he's a virgin? Stop lying."

Kakizaki wrinkled his nose. "It's true," he insisted. "I asked him myself. He's in for murder, right? He didn't have any experience when he got into jail at 19, so you can be almost sure he's never done it with a girl. He said he's never done it with a guy, either, so he's gotta be a virgin."

Kumon crossed his arms and chuckled humorously. "Twenty-eight and virgin, huh. He's got a big one down there. It's a shame he hasn't made good use of it."

"Size doesn't matter. It's all about the skill, mister."

The conversation was turning into something Douno preferred to stay out of, so he pretended to concentrate on his book. So far, Douno had dated three women and had sex with two of them. It was perhaps fewer than most, but he did have some experience.

"Hey, Mr. Douno," Kakizaki drawled. "If you let a guy like Kitagawa with a big dick and no experience bone you, you'll tear your ass, no mistake. Take someone who's a decent size with some skill instead, like me—"

Kumon smacked Kakizaki over the head.

"Don't even think of coming onto Douno in front of Kitagawa, you hear? You'll be killed."

"I know that," Kakizaki whined, cradling his head. "That's why I'm doing it when he's not here."

Shiba, who until then had been a staunch listener, thumped his book shut and sighed.

"To me, it seems like it's just Kitagawa's one-sided thing. At least, I know Douno doesn't have those feelings for him. Right, Douno?"

"Well, I guess," Douno replied vaguely. Kakizaki did not look convinced, and glanced at Douno doubtfully. Douno lowered his eyes back to the pages of his book and pretended not to notice. He mulled over whether he should make Kitagawa stop kissing him so people would stop getting the wrong idea.

Kitagawa returned from his gathering before noon. Immediately upon his return, he fished out of nowhere three individually-wrapped square cookies about five centimetres wide. The four inmates' eyes were instantly glued to the cookies. Sweets were a rare luxury in prison. Excluding those who absolutely hated them, every prisoner eventually began to crave something sugary.

At first, Douno had a hard time understanding prisoners' burning desire for sweets, but now he knew. It was a physical craving.

"What's this?" Kumon asked, swallowing hungrily.

"I got leftovers from the party. This is for Mr. Shiba, Mr. Kumon, and Kakizaki."

Douno was stunned that his name was not called. The other three inmates glanced at him

guiltily, but finished the cookies by themselves.

Douno tried not to look at Kitagawa and the other three as he wondered why he did not get a cookie. Kitagawa had favoured him so far; why was this time different?

Was Kitagawa doing this to spite him? Was this his way of getting back at Douno for treating him crudely despite Kitagawa's persistent confessions of love?

Once he finished sharing the cookies with everyone else, Kitagawa sat down beside Douno as he usually did, and cuddled up to him playfully. Something still nagged at Douno's heart.

Even as night fell and he climbed into his futon, Douno still thought about the cookie from earlier in the day. He felt miserly for being so fixated about a cookie, but it bothered him nevertheless. He could not, however, bring himself to ask outright why he had been left out.

The footsteps of the night guard doing his rounds faded into the distance. Douno sensed the man beside him shifting, and rolled over on his side to turn his back to him.

The man stroked his hair and nuzzled his cheek. Douno usually ignored him and waited for it to pass, but today he felt he could not stand it. Douno yanked his futon over his head, prepared to receive a warning from the guard if things came to it.

But his futon was pulled back down just as forcefully. Douno knitted his brow and screwed his eyes shut.

"Want something good?" said a voice at his ear. Douno opened his eyes.

Kitagawa was holding a cookie—the same one he had shared with everyone else in the daytime, excluding Douno. He could smell the sweet aroma as it was brought to his nose. Douno found himself opening his mouth before even saying thank you.

"Finish it before the guard comes around again," Kitagawa said. He bit down on one end of the cookie, then thrust it out in front of Douno's face. He jerked his chin in a signal to hurry up. Douno hastily sank his teeth into the cookie. He took one bite, two—he was planning to stop before their lips touched, but his greed got the better of him—his lips brushed against Kitagawa's. Suddenly, Kitagawa leaned in for a deeper kiss. He weighed down on Douno, and parted his lips. His tongue stirred the inside of Douno's mouth, sweet from the cookie he had eaten.

It was a strange feeling. Kitagawa had given him a cookie after all. He had a special spot in Kitagawa's heart—the thought made him feel happy and relieved. Once his stubbornness in that aspect crumbled, Douno was conscious for the first time that he was kissing another man.

The other man's breathing, his scent, the heat of another's living flesh—Douno felt his groin begin to itch, and his whole body flushed hotly in embarrassment at his own reaction. He tried to pry the other man off him, but his arms were trembling.

Kitagawa, however, seemed not to notice Douno's response; once he had ravaged Douno to his content, he promptly returned to his own futon.

Douno did not know what to do with his hardened member. If he stood up to grab a tissue, it would be too obvious; if he left it as is, he was bound to ejaculate in his sleep. Douno managed to lay still and think of other things until the impulse passed. That night, he had a dream: it was a very realistic one of being fondled by Kitagawa until he came.

Although Douno admitted to himself that he was now aware of Kitagawa in a sexual way, he never dared to say it out loud. To him, it wasn't a normal thing to be approached romantically by another man and then imagine oneself having an orgasm at the hands of the same man.

Sometimes when Kitagawa kissed him at night, it was such a deep and tenacious kiss that Douno felt his groin stiffen in pleasure, but Kitagawa always returned to his futon promptly afterwards without going any further. Douno began to wonder if Kitagawa's body was not having

the same kind of response as his.

Didn't Kitagawa's lower regions go through the same natural biological reaction as his did? What if his didn't? —It made Douno feel like he was the only perverted one, which was depressing.

Kitagawa was used to living in a cell, which meant he could ejaculate within seconds at will in the washroom stall. That was probably why he was less frustrated—that was what Douno told himself to reassure his spirits.

Despite the slight change in his heart, the days went by unchanged as usual. Winter passed, and with March came the hints of spring. Douno was down to the last three months of his sentence, and he submitted a "hair growth" slip. Inmates on their last three months were allowed to apply for permission to grow their hair out in preparation for their release. Douno was sincerely grateful that he would not have to be released with a shaven head, an obvious trademark of someone who had served time.

Kitagawa's mood turned foul ever since Douno began to grow his hair out. That was not to say he released his frustrations through violence, or was uncooperative in any way, but if Kitagawa had been a man of "few words" until now, he now turned into a man of "barely any".

Every time someone commented that Douno was down to his last 80 days, Kitagawa fixed him with a glare. After a number of such incidents, everyone stopped mentioning Douno's release around him.

One night, Douno woke to Kitagawa kissing him. He was lucid, but unable to tell if this was real or an extension of his dream. Douno found himself pushing his own tongue against the slippery one inside his mouth. Normally, he would not respond to the other's actions, because he knew it would make Kitagawa get carried away. But day after day of the same advances along with the countdown until his release had loosened Douno's emotional restraint.

It felt good to intertwine their tongues as they kissed. Douno thought he was still dreaming; he wanted more, and he hungrily pulled the other man's head closer. After a long kiss, he was hugged so tightly he thought he would suffocate, and his shortness of breath finally woke him up completely.

When he realized that the man was real, Douno panicked a little. Kitagawa was always cautious of the patrol officer, and at most he only sneaked the top half of his body over to Douno's side so that he could return to his own futon quickly. But this time, for some reason, Kitagawa had crawled all the way into his futon.

Douno flushed with embarrassment as he felt Kitagawa's knee nudging his crotch. His groin was stiff as if in sync with the sensual kisses he had devoured.

"Wait—stop—"

When he resisted, he was met with a kiss. With their lips still locked, Kitagawa pressed his leg against Douno's crotch. As the man's thigh rubbed against his erect member, Douno's lower part, long deprived of stimulation, gathered heat and turned hard.

"Stop—" he pleaded in a whisper, "my pyjamas—they'll get dirty." The thigh stopped moving, but instead, a warm hand slipped into his pyjama bottoms and wrapped around the tip of his penis, its fingertips tightening around the tapered part.

Unable to contain it anymore, Douno released himself into Kitagawa's hand. He was kissed again before the heat could fade, his tongue caught up, and a shiver ran down his back.

Amidst it all, Kitagawa abruptly slipped back to his futon. The patrol guard came around moments later. After the guard had gone, Kitagawa got up and washed his hands. Douno covered his ears, not wanting to hear the sound of the water.

Kitagawa returned to his futon after washing his hands. Douno was still covering his ears

when Kitagawa closed his hand around Douno's right wrist. His hand was cold, like the water that had run over it. But soon, it too became warm.

They held hands until morning. Douno tried to let go many times, but each time, Kitagawa re-clasped his hand tightly.

They had exercise period that day. Douno had a foreboding feeling about being alone with Kitagawa. He tried to start a conversation with Shiba instead, but Kitagawa caught him before he could. He was led away by the hand to the wall, and drawn unnaturally close. They sat down.

"I thought I was the only one who felt good while we kissed," Kitagawa murmured quietly. Douno knew the man was talking about his erection during their kiss last night. He stared at the ground.

"You'll be leaving in a little while, Takafumi. I don't wanna be apart."

"I can't help it."

"I don't wanna be apart."

The man squeezed his right hand.

"I don't wanna be apart," he said, almost in a plea. Douno's heart trembled. The man had been abused by his mother, framed as a murderer, and lived his whole life without knowing the warmth of another human—and this man was relying on him. When Douno thought of that, he could not help but want to do something for him.

"You'll be out in another year, too. Then we could meet outside the walls."

"Will you be with me when I get out, Takafumi?" the man asked, peering into his face. Douno thought about what he meant by "be with me."

"If you mean live together with you, I can't do that. But I'm sure we can meet up once in a while and chat—"

"I want to live with you."

"Two men living together? It's not right."

"Kakizaki said some homo couples move in together."

Douno was stunned to be called homosexual. He had never thought of himself that way, and he had only compromised to being kissed because he did not want to cause unneeded trouble.

"I'm not a... well, I'm not homo."

"You got a hard-on kissing a man. You have to be homo."

Douno felt himself blush to his ears. "I—I thought you were someone else."

"Someone else?"

The lie rolled off his tongue easily.

"I have a lover waiting outside for me. She—she's a woman, of course. And we're dating with plans to get married."

Kitagawa's face paled in an instant. Douno never saw anyone's expression change this clearly before.

"—That's why I can't live with you, but let's—let's be friends."

Kitagawa looked down with his mouth still half-open. He cradled his head in his arms, and curled up into a tiny ball. Douno banished the sight from his line of vision and pretended to focus on the softball game.

Perhaps Kitagawa was shocked to know that he had a lover; for a while, the man was quiet. He stopped making overly intimate contact, and stopped kissing him at night.

Kitagawa constantly had a difficult expression on his face, as if he were deep in thought, and he spent every spare moment staring at Douno. Douno continued to mark off each day on his calendar while feeling some discomfort at the man's persistent gaze. It happened one evening after dinner, when he was down to less than two months to his release. The other three men in the cell were talking about an inmate from the cell next door, who had been thrown into solitary confinement. Douno was reading a book. Kitagawa was beside Douno, staring at the book in his hands.

"My sentence ends next August 15," Kitagawa told him suddenly.

"August..."

"Mid-August. When I get out, Takafumi, I'll come see you." His tone was set.

"Sure. We should meet up and talk."

"Are you gonna live in an apartment?"

Douno wondered why he would ask, but answered anyway.

"Most likely, yes. My parents retired into the country, but I'll only cause them trouble if I move back in with them. Besides, I think there would be more job opportunities in the city."

"Are you gonna live with your girlfriend?"

Until Kitagawa mentioned it, Douno had completely forgotten his lie about having a girlfriend.

"I'm not sure about that."

"If you're living alone, I wanna live with you."

"You can't. I'll be—"

"It only has to be until your girlfriend moves in, or you two get married. If your apartment's too small, I can live in the closet. If I can work, I'll pay you."

"That's not what I was talking about. I—"

"Once you get married, I'll move into the apartment next door. I won't cause you trouble. If I can just see your face once a day, I'll be okay."

Douno fell silent. He had no answer to give.

"I thought about lots of things," Kitagawa said. "And I still want to be with you."

Douno clasped his hands and rubbed his thumbs together on the table.

"Uh, well, I'm glad to know that you like me, but—"

"If we're living together, and you want to bring your girlfriend home, and you guys want to have sex, I'll go out until you guys are done."

"Excuse me a minute," Douno said abruptly as he stood up to go to the washroom, unable to bear the awkwardness any longer. But even when he returned, the heavy, suffocating atmosphere remained unchanged.

They sat in silence until rest period rolled around. They cleaned the room, changed, and laid out their futons.

"Hey," Kitagawa said, as Douno lay in his futon with his eyes closed. "Everyone says it's weird, but I really used to think I wouldn't mind living here for the rest of my life. Sometimes it can get too hot or too cold, but I never have to worry about having enough to eat. Even if I get out, I'd have nothing I want to do. But when I thought about how I could live with you—stick close to you all day long if I wanted, and never get in trouble for it—then I started wanting to go outside."

Douno felt like this was something he was not allowed to hear, but he could not ignore it. He knew the man was serious.

"Even after you said you had a girlfriend, Takafumi, I kept thinking and thinking. But no matter how much I think about it, I still want to be with you."

Kitagawa fixed his gaze on Douno.

"Takafumi, I'm always thinking of you. I think of you the moment I wake up until when I go to sleep. Does your girlfriend think of you as much as I do?"

"I'm going to sleep now," Douno said, and closed his eyes. Once he said so, Kitagawa stopped trying to talk to him. Douno thought of the man beside him while he kept his eyes shut. Though ridden with guilt at the lie he had told, he had no intention of going back on his word.

On their weekend off work, Kitagawa and Kumon left to watch a movie for their second-class gathering. Kumon seemed excited to go to his first party.

Of those who were left behind, Shiba and Douno took to reading their books. Kakizaki perused a car magazine, but seemed to tire of it quickly. He reshelved the book and began trying to start a conversation with Douno instead.

"What's your girlfriend like, Mr. Douno?"

Douno looked up from his book.

"I heard from the bro," Kakizaki drawled. "You're gonna get married after you get out? She mus' be a nice girl. Still willing to wait for a guy who's got a criminal record."

"Yeah, I guess..." Douno answered vaguely. He had never expected Kitagawa to tell anyone else about his haphazard lie.

"Oh, but you bet I was *surprised*," Kakizaki continued. "I thought all this time you and bro were together. You guys were gettin' it on at night, weren't you?"

"Well... that was..."

"I was *so* jealous, y'know. But then suddenly a while ago, bro stopped being all over you like he usually is. I thought it was weird, so I asked him about it, 'n that's what he told me." Kakizaki shrugged. "I dunno, man. Bro's done some daring stuff, but he gets hung up about the tiniest things sometimes. He should just separate what goes on in the walls with what goes on outside."

Suddenly from this point, Kakizaki lowered his voice into a whisper.

"Aren' you frustrated now that you've stopped doing it with bro? Y'know, just saying, I'm pretty good at giving head."

"I'm not interested in that kind of stuff."

"But you were doin' it with bro, weren't you?"

Douno had nothing to say in return.

"I think you got the potential for it, Mr. Douno. I saw you a couple times being kissed by bro, and you looked like you were enjoyin' it."

"That's enough," Shiba warned. "Douno says he's not interested, and if Kitagawa's going to give up, then that's good for him."

"Yeah, but bro's definitely still hung up about it. I woke up one night to take a piss, and I saw bro just *staring* at Mr. Douno. I wondered if he was gonna jump him, but he didn't. He just watches."

They heard voices in the distance doing roll call, and soon Kitagawa and Kumon were back. Kumon was talking animatedly about the snacks he had devoured, but Kitagawa only silently stared at his feet.

At night, Douno woke up to someone shaking his shoulder gently. Something was pushed up against his lips, and the moment realized it was a cookie covered in chocolate, he had drawn it into his mouth. He ate it discreetly as to not make noise. Kitagawa silently watched Douno eat.

"Is it good?" he asked. When Douno nodded, Kitagawa smiled slightly, then looked down.

"Thanks, but you don't have to do this anymore," Douno said in a low voice. Kitagawa looked up. "You don't have to bring sweets for me. You'll go through hell if you get caught." He knew how contradictory he sounded by saying so after he had eaten it.

"I don't care if I get punished," Kitagawa said emotionlessly. "I can't think of anything else that might make you happy."

Douno dropped his gaze.

"I love you, Takafumi, but—"

He looked up.

"It hurts to be in love, doesn't it?" Kitagawa said. "Takafumi, do I have to feel like this the whole time I'm in love with you?"

Douno was at once overcome by an urge to run away, but at the same time, he felt his heart being wrenched by the man's earnest confession. He could feel Kitagawa's pain—enough to make him want to give back at least a little.

"It only has to be while we're here," Kitagawa mumbled. "Think about me more than your girlfriend. You don't even have a month left in this place. Just until then."

A firmly-defined period of time. Douno thought to himself. *He wants me to 'think about him', which is just a matter of feelings. If my one word is enough to satisfy him, he thought, then—*

"Fine."

Kitagawa's head snapped up.

"If it's only while we're here—"

Kitagawa had been leaning forward, but he now threw his arms around Douno and pinned him down, startling him. Douno was met with a deep kiss—so deep he could not breathe. He had figured "thinking about" was a matter of the heart, and did not expect it to include anything in the physical sense. Kitagawa kissed him over and over amid ragged breaths. Douno could feel the weight on top of him, and the man's grinding hips. Douno's groin stiffened at the stimulation to the erogenous spots inside his mouth. In the end, he was discovered by Kitagawa, who came crawling into his futon.

"So I can make you hard, too." Kitagawa's hand pressed his crotch through the fabric. Douno averted his face from the man in front of him.

"I just thought you were someone else—"

"Who?"

Douno avoided the man's eyes.

"My girlfriend," he murmured.

"Liar."

"I'm—I'm not lying."

"Your eyes were open while we were doing it. You know it's me, Takafumi."

Cornered into a tight spot, Douno chewed his lip, but the other man's tongue pried his mouth open. Douno was unable to raise a voice, or even resist, as the man's fingers plunged into his pyjamas. The hand grasped at his core so tightly it hurt, and rubbed the length of his shaft.

A violent pleasure coursed through his body that made him almost lose his senses. He was close to ejaculating, and his spine had started to tremble when Kitagawa abruptly slipped back into his own futon.

"Wh—?" Douno's pyjama bottoms were still pulled down, underwear and all; the tip of his upturned penis rubbed against his blanket. He heard the footsteps of the night patrol officer. He couldn't wait for the guard to pass. Douno wrapped his fingers around his own member, and pressed down on its tip. He released the sticky liquid into his hands. Once he had gotten it out, he realized he needed to wipe his hand, but could not get out to fetch a tissue. He waited for the guard to pass, but before he could stand up, Kitagawa came crawling back into his futon again.

Kitagawa noticed the clear change in Douno's penis.

"Did you do it yourself?" he murmured.

When Douno did not answer him, Kitagawa pulled down his pyjama bottoms about halfway, then rubbed his own erect sex against Douno's groin.

Kitagawa thrust his hips for a few minutes before Douno felt something warm dripping down his crotch. Kitagawa got up languidly to retrieve a few tissues from his shelf, and wiped Douno's crotch down. After another deep kiss, he went back to his own futon, and tried to go to sleep holding Douno's right hand.

That hand was still dirty with his own release. Douno resisted, but Kitagawa pried his fingers open by force.

At the sticky sensation, Kitagawa finally seemed to realize why Douno had kept his right hand in a stubborn fist.

"Is this yours, Takafumi?"

He did not answer. The man then stuck out his tongue and gave his hand a lick.

"St—stop—!"

He shivered as the man licked him between the fingers. Kitagawa licked everything clean before he closed his fingers firmly around Douno's hand, and closed his eyes.

It was just a matter of the heart. A matter of feelings—this was so for Douno, but different for Kitagawa. His level of physical intimacy escalated even more than before Douno had mentioned having a lover. Kitagawa's advances were glaringly obvious, and he appeared not to care about the gazes of everyone else but the guard. Douno began to feel ostracized even within their cell.

When they were together, it was as if Kitagawa had to be touching some part of him in order to be satisfied. He would hold hands, or lay a hand on his shoulder; once, he had even pretended to talk to him only to playfully bite his earlobe instead.

Kisses were often, and not even at night anymore; Douno was startled when Kitagawa kissed him suddenly after dinner. Their cellmates were also wide-eyed with surprise. Even if he asked the man not to do it in front of people, Kitagawa brushed it off by saying no one cared anyway.

By now, Douno had a more-than-good idea of just how much Kitagawa was infatuated with him. No matter when or where, the man only ever looked at him. He really, truly only looked at him. On top of it all were Kitagawa's repeated confessions of "I love you" and "I'm in love with you"—it was enough to sway even someone who was not particularly so inclined.

In fact, "swayed" was precisely the effect on Douno. His aversion to kissing in public waned gradually the more times they kissed. By now, he had also gotten used to Kitagawa crawling into his futon every night and stripping him nearly naked.

Kitagawa began drawing again. This time, it was a floor plan of a detached house—a small bungalow.

"This is the entrance. If you go down the hallway, the kitchen is on the right side, and across from that is the living room. The room beyond that is the room where you sleep. The bath is here, and the toilet is next to that."

Kitagawa explained every little detail to Douno.

"I'll have a fence all around the house. And I'll plant a tree in the yard. I'd want a tree that blooms. Like cherry blossoms, or something."

Kitagawa happily went on to fill in his drawing with various things.

"I want a dog, too. A big one. And then in the evenings, we'll take it out for walks together."

Douno was unsettled at the way Kitagawa talked about something that could be his fancy

or his dreams. There were only a few dozen days left of their promised relationship, yet Kitagawa spoke as if it would last forever.

"Hey, how much do you think a house like this would cost? About 3,000,000?⁶ I think my work wages'll add up to about 300,000⁷ by the time I get out. D'you think it'll still be hard?"

"I don't think you'll be able to buy a house with 300,000..."

"I could live under a bridge if it was with you, but you'd probably be cold. Plus, you get sick really easily." Kitagawa threw a glance behind him before nipping at Douno's neck, then sucking it so hard it almost hurt. A quiver ran through Douno's back.

"Do you remember our promise?" he said.

Kitagawa tilted his head.

"You know, that this is... only going to be while we're here."

"I think—" Kitagawa dropped his gaze. "I'm thinking, once I get out, I'll have a talk with your girlfriend. For her, she might be able to be with someone other than you. But for me, it has to be you. It just has to be."

"And what happens to my feelings?" Douno asked.

Kitagawa glanced up at him from under his eyebrows.

"But you love me, too."

Douno widened his eyes at the statement.

"You wouldn't be so kind to me if you didn't love me." Kitagawa licked Douno's cheek and nudged it with the tip of his nose, as a dog would express affectionate familiarity.

Suddenly, a siren went off. Everyone, taken by surprise, broke into a buzz. Kumon pretended he was standing at the toilet and peered into the hallway. He told them no one had entered or left this floor. It looked like there was a dispute on some other floor or wing.

Douno was just thinking of how unnerving the sirens were, when Kitagawa grabbed him by the right hand.

"What?"

Without even answering, Kitagawa squeezed Douno into a narrow space between two futons folded up against the wall. Without a moment's pause, he plunged into a kiss, then yanked down the bottom of Douno's uniform, underwear and all.

"Hey—stop—"

Douno's resistance was swallowed up in a kiss. The man's hands slid underneath his shirt and pinched his nipples so hard they hurt.

"The guards don't come around for a good while when there's a commotion," Kitagawa muttered at his ear, then hoisted Douno, who was pushed up against the wall, onto his lap. He pushed his erect member up against Douno's, and moved up and down in a fierce rhythm. *Everyone's watching*—the thought made Douno struggle fiercely, but no matter how much he did, Kitagawa refused to stop. Douno was forced to ejaculate under the glare of the fluorescent lights.

As he sat still in shock, Kitagawa kissed him while he slid his fingers, wet with their semen, to the spot deep between his legs beyond his scrotum. Of all the times Kitagawa had fondled his genitals, he had never touched that area.

The man's fingertips teased his anus, and entered it slightly. Douno kicked both his feet in protest.

"Stop—stop it!"

"It doesn't hurt with fingers, does it?"

6 Less than 30,000 USD.

7 A little less than 3,000 USD.

"It—it feels gross—"

Kitagawa erased all inconvenient pleas with kisses, and had his way with Douno's body. With two fingers, he gently coaxed Douno's anus. It felt disgusting and he was sure of it, yet when one of those fingers pressed a tingling spot inside him, he found himself erect again. *Everyone's watching*. Douno closed his eyes in humiliation.

The man's fondling fingers withdrew from inside him, and the moment he thought it was over, next he felt a shock of dull pain in his lower half. Douno's whole body shook as he realized that he was being penetrated.

"No—stop it—!"

Even though he tried to shove Kitagawa away, the force drawing him closer was stronger.

"It—it hurts," he cried in pain, and Kitagawa kissed him in answer. While they kissed, he jerked Douno's hips in a steady rhythm. *He's horrible*, Douno thought. They lived together and bathed together, and were used to seeing each other naked. But sex was different. This was public rape.

Kitagawa shuddered, still holding Douno in his arms. Some moments later, he finally pulled out. Kitagawa gave Douno a long kiss. Then, with a tissue, he gently and thoroughly wiped away the mixture of semen and blood that dripped from Douno's lower region.

Kakizaki could be seen scrambling into the toilets. Kitagawa rearranged Douno's clothes, and he was taken back to his seat at the table as if nothing had happened. The whole time, Douno had no idea what to say.

He had been ravaged but a few metres away from everyone, in plain view, yet he was not even allowed to run or hide. Douno was overcome with such embarrassment, humiliation, and shame that he placed both hands on the table and put his head down on top. His lower region ached.

"Did it hurt?" the man asked, nestled up against his back. Douno had no spirit to answer. "But they say it'll stop hurting once you get used to it."

Tears spilled from his eyes. His shoulders trembled, and he knew not whether he was angry or embarrassed.

"Takafumi?"

"Kitagawa." Shiba spoke up from his silence. "You didn't have to do that just now. Think about how poor Douno would feel."

"Huh?"

"I can understand doing it at night, or when no one's looking. Imagine being forced to spread your legs while everyone's watching. It's embarrassing."

Kitagawa fell silent. Douno still had his head down on the table. The man brought his lips up to his ear.

"I love you," he murmured.

Douno curled up in his futon the moment rest period was called. He got up twice, however, to go the toilet. He had a strange case of something like diarrhoea, and he felt a burning pain in his anus every time he squatted. When he walked, the pain made him bend forward, and it was unbearable for him to be seen in public like this.

Kitagawa repeatedly said "I love you" as if it were an excuse, but Douno ignored him by lying on his stomach and pretending he was asleep. When the room grew dark at lights-out, Kitagawa immediately climbed into Douno's futon. When Douno struggled and tried to kick him out, Kitagawa kissed him and held him tight.

No matter how many times the man whispered "I love you" in his ear, Douno did not respond to his kisses. Once Kitagawa sensed that Douno was in a bad mood, he reluctantly returned to his own futon. Next, he attempted to hold hands, but Douno did not even allow that.

In the middle of the night, Douno woke to a strange sensation between his legs. He felt like someone was fondling his penis. When he felt between his legs with his hand, he was met with the gritty sensation of hair. He felt a flash of anger at Kitagawa for sneaking around with his body, even after he had refused so vehemently. No matter how forcibly he tried to shove the man's hand away, it showed no signs of letting up.

"Kei! Kei, stop it!" he scolded in a whisper. But the man did not listen.

"Mr. Douno."

The voice from below was not Kitagawa's. The realization made Douno freeze in shock.

"Just head, Mr. Douno. I won't ask for your ass. Just a little bit, please."

"No—stop! Stop it!" As soon as he realized it was not Kitagawa, Douno felt a wave of disgust as goosebumps rose on his skin.

"Get the hell off me!"

"Just a little bit, please."

They repeated this attack-and-defence, until suddenly the futon was thrown aside. Kakizaki snapped his head up from where he had pulled down Douno's pyjama bottoms and been sucking at his crotch.

Kitagawa was standing over them, feet apart, glaring at Kakizaki with glinting eyes. He ruthlessly kicked the man off of Douno. Kakizaki gave a short cry of pain and curled up. Kitagawa grabbed him by the front of his pyjamas, yanked him off the floor, and delivered a punch to his face. Kakizaki went flying all the way to Kumon's futon across, waking the man up.

"Wh—what the hell?"

Kakizaki gave a shrill cry of fear and hid behind Kumon. Kitagawa dragged him back out, and delivered two more hard cracks to his face.

"B—bro, I'm so sorry! I'm so sorry!"

Kitagawa ignored the man's excuses and continued to hit him. Then, he grabbed the man's head and smashed it against the wall. Kakizaki slid to the floor. Kitagawa still tried to lunge at him, but Shiba grabbed him by the armpits from behind.

"Calm down, Kitagawa!"

Kakizaki dashed into the toilet while Shiba was restraining Kitagawa.

"Hey! What the hell is going on here?" the night guard shouted from outside. Kitagawa, by now even deaf to the guard, wrestled free from Shiba and was at the toilet stall in a flash. He kicked the door down and burst inside.

"Aghhhhh! Aghhhhh!"

Kakizaki's bloodcurdling screams echoed. The sirens blared, and a clamour of footsteps approached. The door opened, and four officers burst in to seize the two men and drag them out of the washroom.

Kakizaki's face was bloodied, and he was foaming at the mouth. Kitagawa struggled violently. Even with four guards restraining his arms and legs, he thrashed fiercely like a shrimp. One of the guards aimed a kick at the struggling man's ribs. There was a resounding crack, and Kitagawa's movements stopped for a moment.

"P—Please, don't hurt him!" Douno begged, running up to them.

"Don't move from the wall!" the guard snapped, slapping him across the face. Kitagawa, on seeing this, began to resist even more aggressively. The guards teamed up to assail him with punches and kicks.

Kitagawa went limp, and was dragged out of the cell like a sack of potatoes. Douno thought he heard someone call his name, and shook free of the night guard's restraining grasp to burst out of the cell.

"Takafumi, Takafumi," a voice desperately cried as it grew smaller and smaller into the distance. Douno was shoved violently back into his cell by the night guard.

Kakizaki was taken to the infirmary, and Kitagawa was taken to the interrogation room, leaving three members remaining in the cell. They tidied the room at the guard's orders, then were commanded to go back to sleep.

Even after he had settled back into his futon, Douno could not sleep. He was worried about Kakizaki's wounds, but more than that, he was beside himself with worry at the thought of the kind of cruelty Kitagawa might be going through. He prayed desperately that they had not imprisoned Kitagawa in a secure cell like they had done to him.

Three days passed after the incident, then four—but neither Kitagawa nor Kakizaki showed signs of returning. On the fourth day, Kakizaki's belongings were removed entirely. Douno was shaken—perhaps the man had died? However, Shiba told him he had only been moved to a different cell, which Douno was relieved to hear.

Amidst all of that, a new inmate moved into their cell. He was a forty-year old man caught for possession of stimulant drugs. He was slightly overweight, and his nose always had an oily sheen like the wings of a cockroach.

Three weeks passed without a sign of Kitagawa's return. Douno was down to less than a week until his release. He had figured Kitagawa would return while he was still here, but that seemed like an unlikely possibility now. He heard from inmates in other cells about someone who had gotten punished for fighting with a cellmate. That man had gotten one month in light solitary confinement.

Douno thought of asking Shiba to pass along his parent's home address to Kitagawa after he came out of solitary. There was also the option of writing it on one of Kitagawa's belongings in the cell, but if it was caught in an inspection, it would put Kitagawa in a bad position. In comparison, asking Shiba to pass it on orally was a safer and more reliable method, but one had to choose his messenger carefully. There was always the possibility of his address being used for unsavoury purposes, like what had happened with Mitsuhashi.

During exercise period, Douno took Shiba aside from the softball game he had been watching, and led him to a remote corner of the grounds. There, he tentatively asked if Shiba would tell Kitagawa his address once he came out.

Shiba appeared to be turning it over in his mind.

"I'm fine with that, but are you, Douno?"

"Fine, as in—?"

"I'm asking you whether you're willing to have that kind of relationship with Kitagawa even after you get out of prison."

It was a frank question. Douno looked at his feet.

"Personally, I think it's better if you just keep it inside the walls as just a prison thing. I'm not saying Kitagawa's a bad person. I'm just saying that people'll appear different out there as opposed to in here. Out there in your world of choices, are you still going to be able to choose him?"

Douno hesitated. Until now, he had been so occupied about telling Kitagawa that he had never considered the option of not telling.

"If you're not prepared to be with him for the rest of your life, just call it quits. Same goes for the friends-only thing. Kitagawa isn't the kind of guy who can draw the line like that."

Shiba went away, leaving Douno alone to think by himself. He thought about whether he really loved Kitagawa. At first he had thought Kitagawa was an unfeeling man. Then, he saw him as a kind, but also pitiful, person. He wanted to be nice to the man, but were there any romantic feelings attached? Perhaps he had only pitied Kitagawa's unhappy past, and been swept up by their extraordinary circumstances.

Where did these feelings come from—his longing to see Kitagawa's face, his desire not to make this a permanent goodbye? No matter how much he thought about it, no clear answer took form inside him.

On the day before his release, Douno was transferred to another cell. On the day prior to that, Shiba had come up to him after dinner.

"Now you're really a step away from getting out, huh," he had said. Then, they had exchanged some small talk.

If you're still planning to tell Kitagawa your address—perhaps that was what Shiba had meant when he approached him. Douno did not give him an address. But at the same time, that did not mean he had decided to end his relationship with Kitagawa altogether.

Douno was released on June 5. As he walked down the long, silent hallway, he thought he heard Kitagawa's voice. He turned around. There was not a shadow of anyone there.

His parents and sister had come to pick him up outside the walls. Douno wept in spite of himself at seeing the three. He went to parents' house in the country, tasted his mother's cooking for the first time in a long time, and later nodded off into a relaxing slumber. He woke up once in the middle of the night. He had been sleeping with his futon over his face. He hastily pulled it down below his chin, then realized he was not in prison anymore. He smiled wryly.

Less than a month after his release, Douno began working as an accountant for a food product company. Immediately after his release, he had registered in a support group for people falsely accused of groping, and he had gotten this job through an introduction by a group member.

Along with the start of his new-found job, Douno moved out of his parents' house and into an apartment. He worked while participating actively as a member of the support group.

In his third month of work, he was confessed to by a woman at his workplace seven years his junior. Kitagawa crossed his mind for an instant, but Douno could not deny that he found the small, delicate girl attractive.

He was never quite able to refuse her completely, and they began dating. Douno's memories of prison never left him, but they grew faint as each day passed. Nevertheless, he was still traumatized by crowded trains, and he could not bring himself to ride them.

One year passed after Douno was released from prison. Less than a month before Kitagawa was set for his release, Douno's girlfriend told him that a child was coming. She was two months pregnant. Douno was afraid that her parents might object because of his past sentence—albeit an unjust one—in prison. However, her parents accepted him. Wedding preparations and procedures were decided in a flurry, and through the hurried succession of days came August 15, the day of Kitagawa's release.

Douno had promised nothing, but when he thought of how the man probably had no one to greet him, he was overcome with pity. When he imagined the man standing forlornly by himself outside the penitentiary, it grew almost unbearable. Douno wanted to be the one person, at least, who would be there to greet Kitagawa. He got ready to go out. But as he sat on the edge of his bed, he found it hard to stand up again. Kitagawa would be released at 10 o'clock at the earliest. It would take two and a half hours to get there by bullet train, which meant Douno had to be on the 7

o'clock train. But his legs refused to move.

Time passed even as he simply sat there. Douno wanted to see him, wanted to see his face—but at the same time, he was afraid of meeting him in person.

He was no longer living in the future that Kitagawa wanted. The two of them would not be able to live together. Would Kitagawa still be happy to be greeted by him?

Why couldn't we be friends? We could have been together for longer that way. I know it would have lasted longer than a romantic relationship.

In the end, even after the sun had set, Douno did not get up from the edge of the bed. His chest burned as tears unwittingly sprang to his eyes, but he could find no words to explain why he was crying.